



Why the international community is failing urban refugees

Four myths about protracted displacement

Lucy Earle

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This paper challenges decision makers' and humanitarian practitioners' reliance on stereotypes about protracted displacement. It questions received ideas about camps and about displaced people's experiences in towns and cities. It is structured around four such 'myths', examining each in turn, before discussing the lived realities refugees face, especially when seeking informal work in urban areas. These four myths maintain the status quo in funding and programming priorities that privilege camps, and that prevent hundreds of thousands of displaced people from finding more dignified, productive and meaningful lives in urban areas. It is time to switch to *in situ* support within urban areas, and to improve conditions for both IDPs/refugees and local populations working in the informal sector.

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Summary

The world has more displaced people than at any point since the Second World War. By the end of 2022, conflict, violence and persecution had forced 35.3 million refugees to cross an international border, and had displaced 62.5 million within their own countries¹. Disasters and climate change have displaced a further 8.7 million².

Most have sought sanctuary in towns and cities. The UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR, estimates only 22% of refugees live in camps and that at least 60% of refugees live in urban areas (but these statistics remain unreliable³). The majority of internally displaced people (IDPs) are thought to live in urban areas, but accurate data on the location of IDPs globally are not available⁴.

Yet despite the overwhelming urbanisation of displacement, refugees and IDPs in urban areas rarely receive assistance from humanitarian agencies. Support for displaced people, and engagement with local authorities, is the exception not the rule. Instead, funding and policy attention focuses on camps, even though they house the minority.

This is troubling for several reasons. Displacement is increasingly protracted. According to the World Bank, at the end of 2022, 67% of refugees had been displaced for more than five years⁵. Camps intended as temporary solutions to crises are often maintained for decades when conflicts persist. As international funding and attention wanes, life in camps – already restricted –

may be reduced to bare survival. Generally, encamped refugees have no right to work or to movement. But food assistance and access to basic services may not be enough for a dignified existence, and these restrictions can become inter-generational as children grow up in camps. Displaced people's potential to lead fulfilling lives and make social and economic contributions are being severely curtailed.

Meanwhile, many IDPs/refugees believe that towns and cities offer greater opportunities and normalcy. So they bypass or leave camps, and as a result, are generally left without support. They may lead a precarious existence, and be vulnerable to abuse and harassment. Yet most remain determined to stay in the city.

This paper argues for change in humanitarian programming in situations of protracted displacement. It is not an academic critique of the scholarly literature, but it draws on academic as well as grey literature, alongside data from the *Protracted Displacement in an Urban World* (PDUW) project (see Section 1).

Over the course of the PDUW project, several 'received ideas' emerged as widely-held assumptions by donors, UN agencies, humanitarian practitioners and by host country governments. We challenge decision makers' and humanitarian practitioners' reliance on these stereotypes, or 'myths'.

They are:

- **Myth One. Since most displaced people in cities do not receive humanitarian assistance, they must be 'self-reliant'** (economically independent and maintaining a decent standard of living). We found a wide range of outcomes for displaced people in cities. Some are, indeed, managing to live well, but others are extremely vulnerable and unable to meet their basic needs.
- **Myth Two. Refugees and IDPs who leave camps for cities, or who bypass camps altogether, are younger and better educated than those in camps.** We found very little variation in average or median age between urban and camp cohorts. Levels of education vary from country to country, but there are significant proportions of refugees in camps with secondary education, and some have studied at university level.
- **Myth Three. Camps are safe havens for displaced people, and offer a safety net for the most vulnerable refugees.** We found acute food insecurity in the camps, homelessness, and limited access to healthcare.
- **Myth Four. Camps can become stand-alone towns or municipalities where refugees and IDPs can live without aid.** We found very low levels of employment in the refugee camps. 'Jobs' were often volunteer positions for NGOs. Most camps are remote, making it unlikely that viable employment opportunities can emerge for large numbers of refugees in the short- to medium-term.

The PDUW research study was designed to compare and contrast the camp and urban experience. However, we remained aware of the synergies between camps and urban areas, particularly in relation to livelihoods strategies. Conversely, our engagement with practitioners and policymakers in the refugee-hosting countries we studied suggests they conceptualise displacement as binary. People are either registered in the city, or in the camp. If you are in the camp, you are thought to be vulnerable, and almost certainly dependent on aid. If you are in the city, in most cases, you must fend for yourself. If you struggle in the city, then you are advised – by the UN or government – to relocate to a camp.

We believe that the currency and tenacity of the myths examined here are particularly damaging to refugees and IDPs, and to hosting communities and countries. The myths maintain the status quo in funding and programming priorities that privileges camps, and prevents hundreds of thousands of displaced people from finding more dignified, productive and meaningful lives in urban areas. They are declared 'self-reliant' and dismissed as single young men who can make it on their own. In reality, the UN, international NGOs and hosting governments are collectively failing populations with diverse profiles, needs and capacities.

International agencies and donors generally provide little or no assistance to urban refugees or IDPs, and fail to support municipal authorities to incorporate them into existing service provision. Recent high-profile initiatives have focused instead on promoting formal employment in distant industrial parks and special economic zones or attempting to turn remote camps into autonomous human settlements.

It is time to switch to a pragmatic *in situ* urban response that engages with the reality of life for refugees and IDPs – particularly their involvement in the informal sector. Humanitarian and development programming needs to support local and national governments and provide incentives for authorities to remove the most significant barriers that stop displaced people achieving a decent life in the city.

The Protracted Displacement in an Urban World project

In February 2020, IIED launched a 3.5 year research project entitled *Out of camp or out of sight? Realigning response to protracted displacement in an urban world (PDUW)*. It aimed to realign the focus of policy and programming towards the lives and experiences of the urban displaced. The project's overall objectives were to understand how the living environment – camp or urban area – affects displaced people; to identify unmet needs in the city; and to work with local authorities and other urban stakeholders to raise awareness of the barriers to greater wellbeing and livelihoods opportunities for the urban displaced.



The PDUW project was the first large-scale comparison of the wellbeing and livelihoods of refugees and IDPs in camps and urban areas. It focused on one camp and one city in each of Ethiopia, Kenya, Jordan, and Afghanistan, and generated qualitative and quantitative datasets (all datasets are available via the UK's Reshare data platform). The findings have been documented in a series of country working papers, policy briefs and reports and will form a special issue of *Environment and Urbanization* (October 2024). Many of these outputs are available at www.protracteddisplacement.org.

IIED led the wellbeing component of the research, with the UK's Cardiff University leading the livelihoods component, working in close collaboration with researchers from Dilla University, Ethiopia, Maseno University, Kenya, the Hashemite University of Jordan, the social enterprise Samuel Hall, the Women's Refugee Commission, and the Mayor's Migration Council.

This Issue Paper is structured around four 'myths' that became apparent during the project: that displaced people in cities are self-reliant, that they are younger and better-educated than those in camps, that camps offer effective safe havens and/or safety nets, and that camps can become stand-alone settlements. Each is examined in turn. We then discuss the need for a new focus on the reality of refugees' lives and livelihoods in urban centres.

The discussion of myths two (younger and better-educated) and four (stand-alone settlements) uses data from all four study countries. Myths one (self-reliance in cities) and three (camps are safe havens) relate to situations where an encampment policy is in place for refugees, and the camp is presented as the alternative to the city by the UN, NGOs and government. In Afghanistan, the camp-like settlement we studied, Barikab, is, in essence, a housing project, and IDPs cannot be told to 'return' there, nor will they receive humanitarian assistance if they do. For this reason, we omit Afghanistan from the discussion of myths one and three.

There are no doubt other assumptions and stereotypes relating to forced displacement that could be challenged. Some have already been addressed. For example, 'popular assumptions' about the

negative economic impacts of hosting refugees have been debunked⁶. However, we believe that the currency and tenacity of the myths examined here are particularly damaging to refugees, IDPs, and to hosting communities and their countries. The myths maintain the status quo in funding and programming priorities that privileges camps, and prevents hundreds of thousands of displaced people from finding more dignified, productive and meaningful lives in urban areas.

Research methods

The project took a mixed methods approach, combining a quantitative survey of displaced people in camps, their urban counterparts and urban hosts (n=3609), and qualitative semi-structured interviews with refugees and IDPs in camps and urban areas, half of which focused on wellbeing and half on livelihoods and enterprises (n=200). The project also used focus groups in its early stages as concepts were defined, and validated initial findings through key informant interviews in each country. For all methods, the sampled populations were composed equally of men and women over the age of 18.

In order to draw our comparisons, we aimed to sample similar displaced population across the two sites in each country. In Kenya we focused on Somali refugees in Nairobi and Dadaab camp. In Jordan we worked with Syrian refugees in Amman and Zaatari camp. In Ethiopia we studied Eritrean refugees in Addis Ababa and Aysaita camp. And in Afghanistan our focus was IDPs and returnees in Jalalabad and Barikab (a camp-like settlement).

In Ethiopia, our original aim was to compare Tigrinya-speaking Eritrean refugees in Addis Ababa with residents of a camp in the Tigray region. But after the outbreak of war in 2020 and the destruction of many of those camps, the research focus shifted to Eritrean refugees in the Afar region of Ethiopia. However, we were not able to identify significant numbers of Afari speaking refugees in Addis Ababa, and there are marked cultural differences between Afaris (who are traditionally semi-nomadic pastoralists) and Tigrinyans who have moved from camps to the capital. The refugee populations in Ethiopia are not, therefore, directly comparable.

COUNTRY	URBAN REFUGEES	URBAN HOSTS	CAMP REFUGEES	TOTAL
Ethiopia	365	153	366	884
Kenya	315	156	382	853
Jordan	368	217	398	983
	URBAN IDPS	URBAN HOSTS	IDPS IN CAMP-LIKE SETTLEMENT	
Afghanistan	371	156	362	889
				3,609

For our survey in cities, we chose neighbourhoods with high concentrations of refugees. Using satellite imagery, geographic clusters were chosen at random, and enumerators plotted out random 'walks' stopping at buildings along the way, from a randomly selected starting point. Finally, an adult member (18 years +) of the household was chosen at random to take part in the survey. Purposive sampling was introduced during the process to ensure 50% men 50% women and to meet the quota of refugees/IDPs (approx. 360) and hosts (approx. 180). The same steps were followed in camps, although all respondents were displaced people.

The survey was translated into local languages but was largely identical in each country, with some minor amendments to questions on legal status to ensure accurate reflection of the policy environment. It covered basic demographic information, migration trajectories and future plans, as well as questions based on the project's wellbeing framework (see Box 1), income, livelihoods, and enterprises.

For our qualitative data, we used purposive sampling. For wellbeing, we conducted 25 semi-structured interviews with displaced people (roughly equal between men and women) in each location (camp and

city). Interviewees were survey respondents who had agreed to be contacted again, and were selected to achieve a mix of ages, income and education levels as well as family situations. Interviews explored people's daily lives, based on the project's holistic understanding of wellbeing.

For livelihoods, we conducted 50 semi-structured interviews with refugee- and host-run entrepreneurs in the urban and camp locations. Because of the limited number of enterprises in the camps, the split between the two locations was approximately 35 interviews in the city and 15 interviews in the camp. These interviews explored business creation, decision-making, networks, achievements, and challenges. Additionally, we undertook key informant interviews with UNHCR and UN offices, national and local governments, and humanitarian workers and refugee groups in all four countries to follow up on themes that had emerged from the survey and semi-structured interviews. All data were collected during 2021 and 2022. We also established an extensive consultative mechanism of well-attended participatory forums in each country to explore the policy impacts of the research.

BOX 1. NEW 'WELLBEING' AND 'DISPLACEMENT ECONOMICS' FRAMEWORKS AND METRICS

A key output from the PDUW study has been a framework to understand wellbeing, and a metric derived from survey data. The framework is based on a broad interpretation of wellbeing, encompassing bodily, social, economic, political and psychosocial dimensions. The approach used to create the metric is described in an IIED working paper⁷.

The framework aims to promote better understanding of refugees' experiences of living in camps and urban areas. Rather than treating refugees as populations simply to be maintained, or assumed to be 'self-reliant', it emphasises that they are complex human populations with a range of needs, capabilities and aspirations.

It is the first such attempt to design a framework to understand wellbeing specifically from the perspective of people who have been displaced by war or violence, and to develop a metric that allows for comparisons between refugees living in different settings within the same country, or among such populations living in different countries. As such, it stands as a counterweight to much data collected on displaced populations that tend to focus on basic needs in isolation, and it counters interpretations of wellbeing as narrowly connected to health and/or mental health.

The framework builds on work by Bath University's Wellbeing in Development research group in the 2000s, which intended to identify barriers that hinder displaced people's achievement of a 'good life'^{8,9}.

The PDUW study also explored the link between displaced people's livelihoods and their economic enterprise, creating a new Displacement Economies Framework. This is a theoretical concept and programming tool that seeks to understand the interlinked and dynamic elements of displaced people's economic activity, in order to reveal the economic potential that they bring to their new settings¹⁰.

The framework builds on recent advances in the concept of 'refugee economies'¹¹ and 'displacement economies'¹². It offers a clear analytical framework for exploring barriers to economic inclusion and for reflecting the collective contribution and interlinked nature of livelihoods and enterprise, and how these evolve over time. This addresses critical gaps in previous approaches. While research on refugee livelihoods is now well-established, debate has often focused on assessing the economic burden of urban refugees and IDPs on labour markets, with less attention to their economic contributions as consumers, tax-payers, entrepreneurs and agents of economic development¹³.

Myth One: Refugees living in cities are self-reliant

This section discusses how policy and academic literature conceptualise and critique 'self-reliance'. It then looks at PDUW data on the percentages of urban refugees who receive different types of humanitarian assistance. This data confirms that most urban refugees do not receive significant amounts of aid. It then considers the PDUW metric of 'economic wellbeing' as a proxy for broader measures of self-reliance, alongside data on surveyed households' ability to cover expenses from income.



The UNHCR defines self-reliance as the “social and economic ability of an individual, a household or a community to meet its essential needs in a sustainable manner and with dignity”¹⁴. While the ideas this encompasses are not new¹⁵, the concept of ‘self-reliance’ is much in vogue. It is one of four objectives of the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) and the accompanying Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) launched after the 2016 UN Summit for Refugees and Migrants.

An accepted view

With a few notable exceptions, refugees who have sought sanctuary in the towns and cities of low- and middle-income countries do not receive humanitarian assistance. This has given rise to the myth, (or perhaps convenient fiction), that urban refugees must therefore be ‘self-reliant’. In other words, if they choose not to receive aid in a camp, then they must fend for themselves, and if they are able to do that, then they must have achieved economic self-sufficiency (and so do not require any assistance from humanitarian agencies). The myth manifests itself through an assumption on the part of humanitarian agencies that providing livelihoods training in urban areas is sufficient to foster self-reliance¹⁵.

UNHCR has shown steadily increasing interest in individual/household self-reliance and, by extension, livelihoods programming, in recent decades. By 2010–2011 UNCHR’s global appeal identified self-reliance and livelihoods as one of seven global strategic priorities¹⁶. This reflects a general move towards development-oriented initiatives that focus on resilience, integrating refugees into local markets and promoting individual responsibility^{17,18}.

While some have cautiously welcomed the renewed focus on self-reliance as a particularly relevant concept for urban refugees¹⁹, some criticise donors and humanitarian agencies for a neoliberal approach that puts individual responsibility on refugees to support themselves, seeing self-reliance as a “remedy for dependency and protracted displacement” without taking into account the structural impediments to achieving a sustainable livelihood²⁰. Others note that since displacement is increasingly protracted, there is rising pressure to reduce direct aid costs. They suggest UN agencies, faced with funding shortfalls, “have adopted self-reliance and livelihood policies at least in part for this reason”¹⁶.

But both the concept and practice of self-reliance are “fraught with contradictions”, precisely because they are often based on donor and UN motivation to develop a cost-effective exit strategy from “care and maintenance” regimes²⁰.

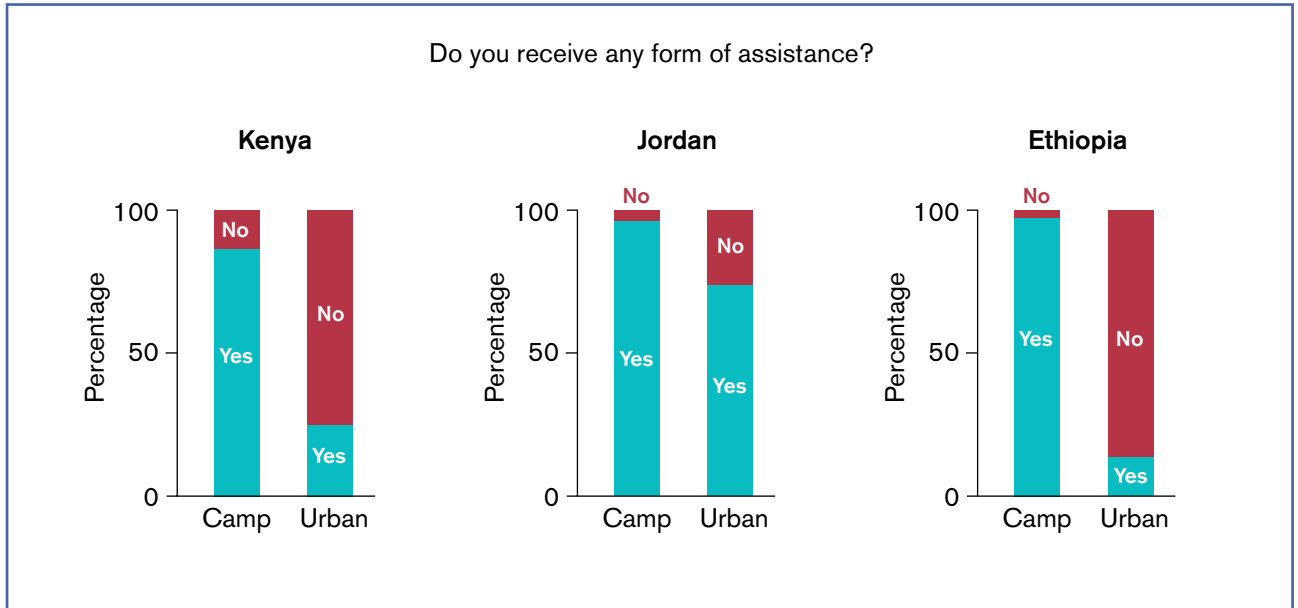
Declaring a population to be self-sufficient or self-reliant may be an expedient political calculation^{16,20,21}. But “the fact that some groups may have not received much or any assistance over a long period of time [...] should not be equated with those people having achieved satisfactory self-reliance and sustainable livelihoods”¹⁶. Withdrawing aid does not automatically generate self-reliance. Indeed, in some contexts, extra material resources are needed.

Self-reliance also requires rights and freedoms^{22,23}. Making refugees themselves responsible for self-reliance ignores and downplays the many systemic and structural challenges that work against this²⁴. Such attitudes create a wilful blindness to serious deprivations experienced by some urban refugees.

How does PDUW data relate to this myth?

Our survey included a series of questions about household-level finances as well as about the individual respondent’s personal employment situation. For example, we asked whether the household received assistance, or had received it within the past year, from the government, an NGO or international organisation (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Yes/No responses, in percentage points, to the question: ‘Do you receive any form of humanitarian assistance?’



The majority of refugee households in Nairobi (76%) and Addis Ababa (88%) receive no humanitarian assistance. The situation is very different in Amman, where 73% of refugees report receiving aid. We included various

forms of assistance in our survey: cash, food and non-food items (for example, cooking equipment, heaters). Figures 2,3 and 4 show the breakdown.

Figure 2: Yes/No responses, in percentage points, to the question: ‘Does your household receive in-kind food assistance?’

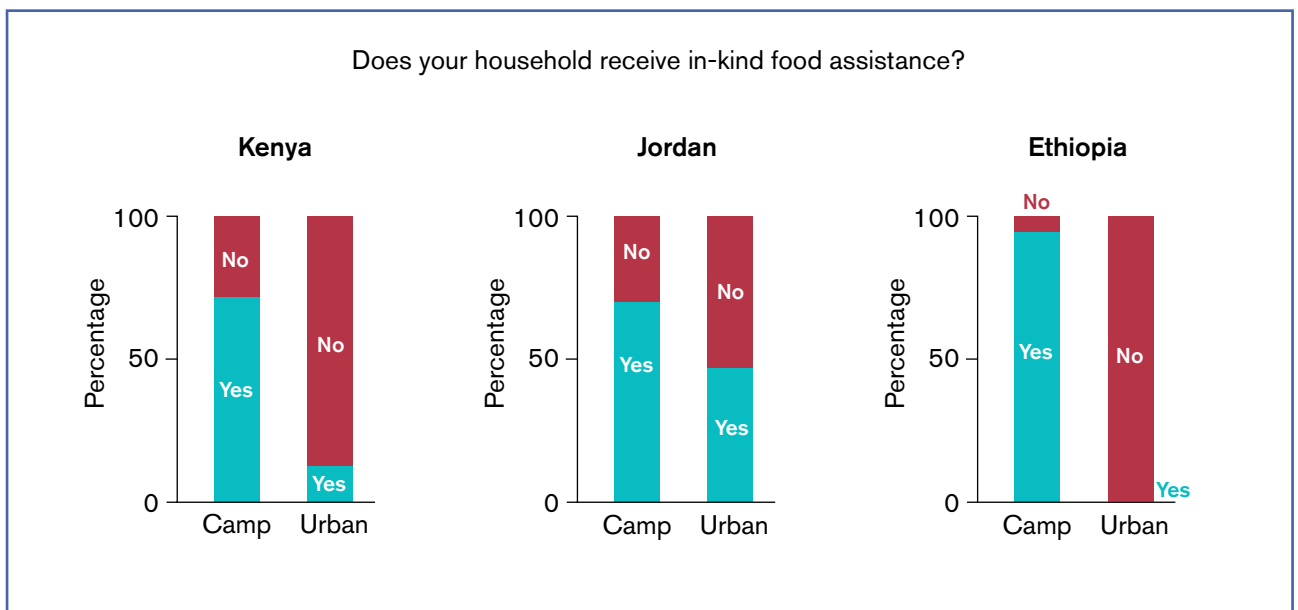


Figure 3: Yes/No responses, in percentage points, to the question: ‘Does your household receive in-kind assistance other than food?’

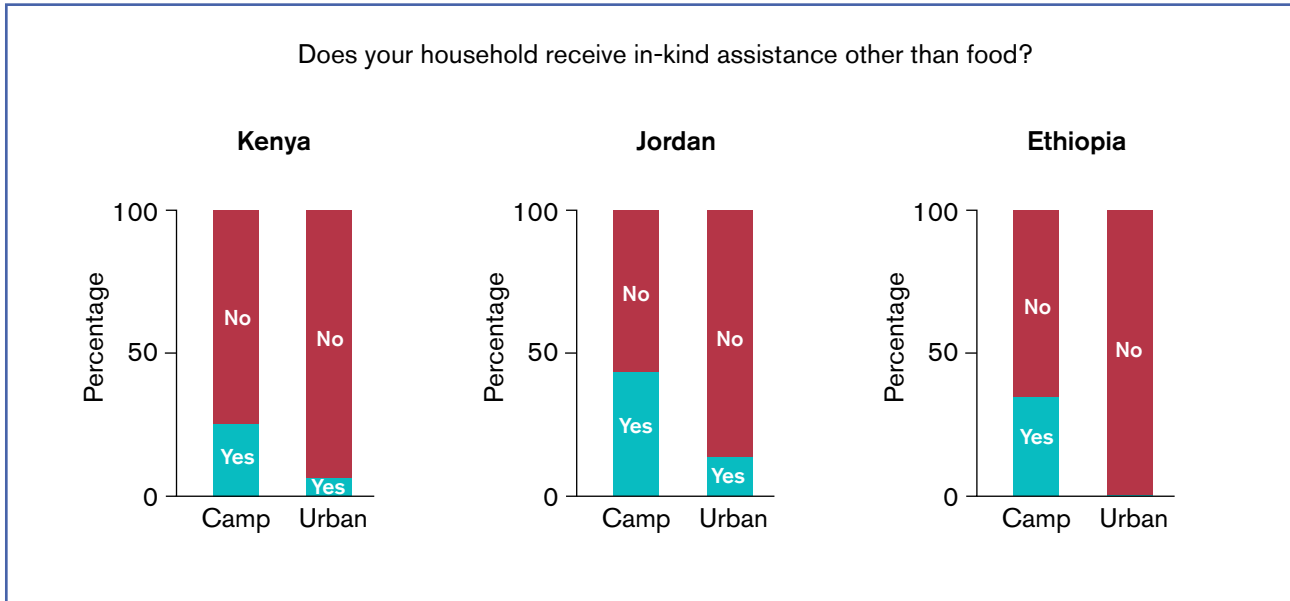
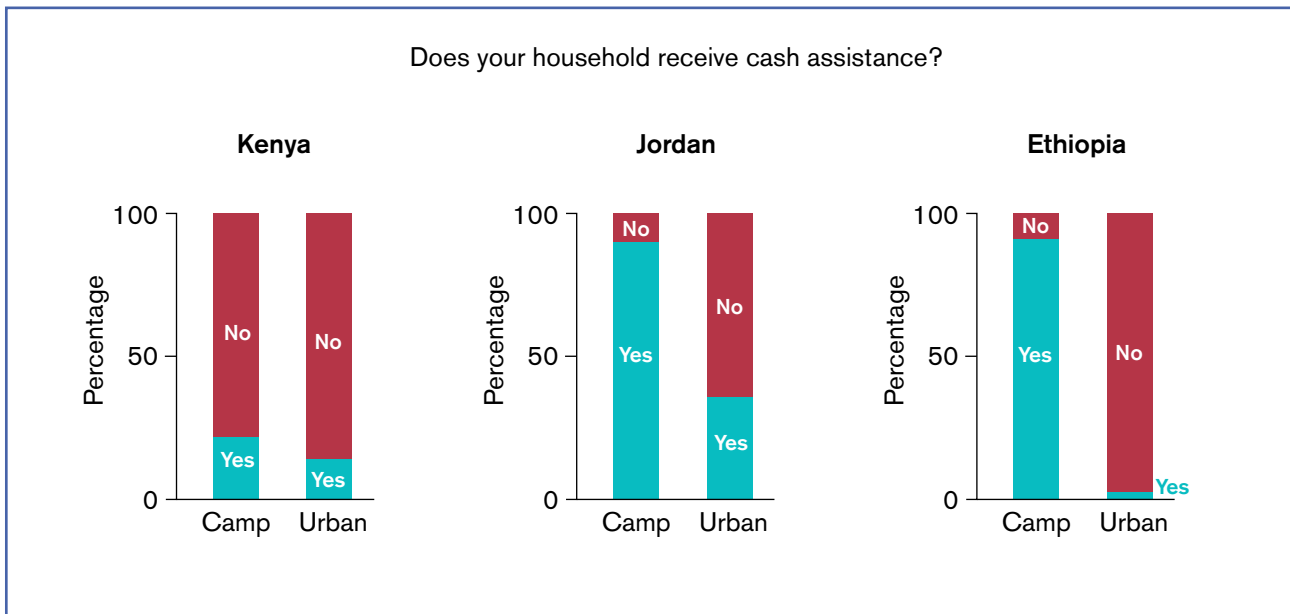


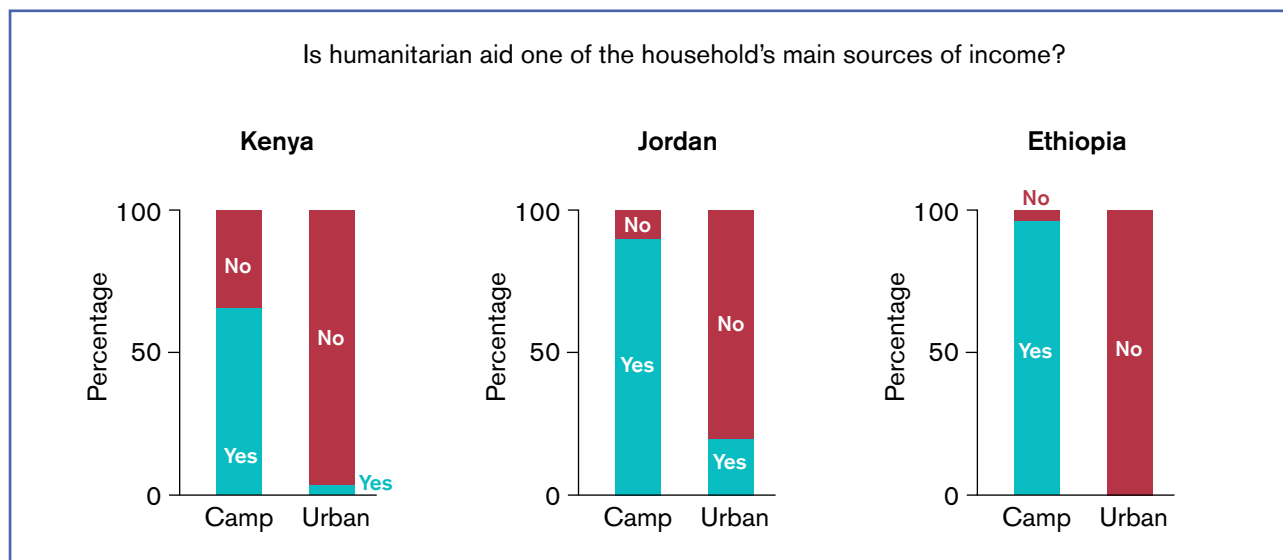
Figure 4: Yes/No responses, in percentage points, to the question: ‘Does your household receive cash assistance?’



In our sample, the only city where a significant number of refugees received humanitarian aid was Amman. Among those receiving aid, 20% of individuals surveyed were living in a household where humanitarian assistance was a main source of income (see Figure 5).

Many refugees in the city also receive a monthly sum to spend on food from the World Food Programme (WFP). This has been steadily decreasing in recent years, and at the time of writing it varied between US\$21 and US\$32 per person per month.

Figure 5: Yes/No responses, in percentage points, to the question 'Is humanitarian aid one of the household's main sources of income?'



Other sources of unearned income for refugee households are remittances and pensions. Remittances are particularly important to our sample of refugees in Addis, where 85% of respondents referenced receiving cash from abroad. The only other place where remittances were recorded was Eastleigh in Nairobi, where 16% of respondents reported receiving them. Pensions helped support 10 and 14% of households in Aysaita and Zaatari respectively. From this information, we can conclude that, apart

from in Addis, most households do not receive unearned income.

We may assume, therefore, that there is at least one household member receiving income from work or from owning a business. We asked interviewees if they had an income from work. Our survey data shows that, while the numbers of refugees/IDPs earning an income from work was higher in the city than in the camp across all of the countries in the study, the percentages are not uniformly high across countries (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: Yes/No responses, in percentage points, to the question 'Do you receive income from work?'

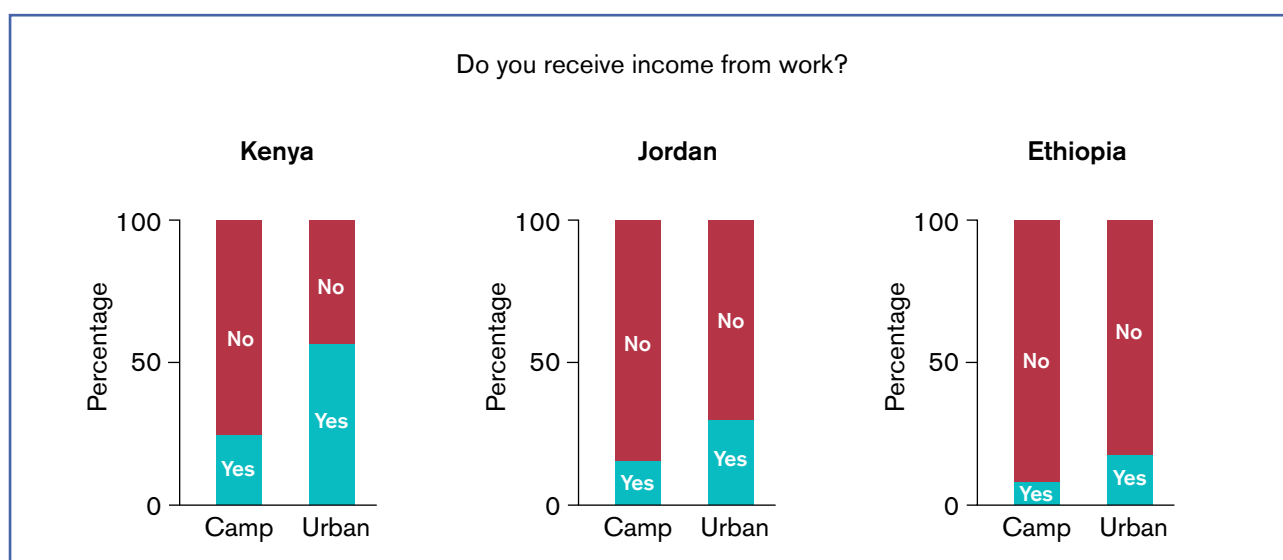


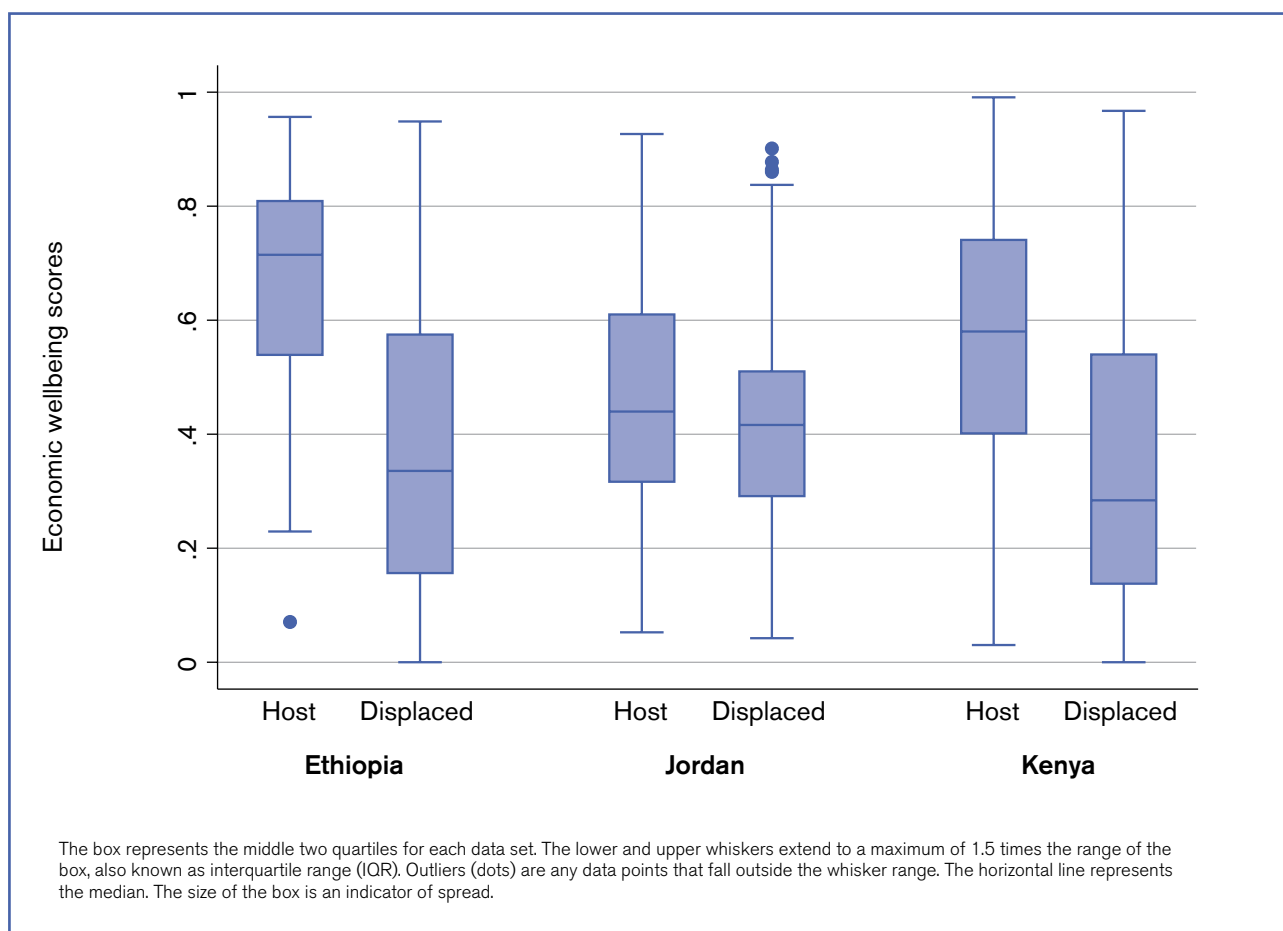
Figure 6 shows that in Jordan, around 30% of urban refugees responding to the survey earn income from work. The corresponding percentages for Kenya and Ethiopia are 57% and 18%. This would suggest that while most of the urban refugees in our survey are not reliant on aid, there may be significant pressure on household finances, where so few members have managed to find paid work. In addition, we know from other questions in our survey that work may be irregular and poorly paid. This causes us to question whether such populations can be considered self-reliant.

But what is self-reliance? The lack of a standard or agreed measurement is a significant hurdle that has been recognised for more than 30 years²², although recently the Refugee Self-Reliance Initiative has developed a measurement tool for practitioners to use in rapid assessments²⁵. The PDUW project has sought to deepen understanding of self-reliance by creating a wellbeing metric (see Box 1), and by taking a holistic approach to measuring quality of life, encompassing bodily, economic, political, social and psychosocial wellbeing.

While not ideal, we can take the economic component of the PDUW wellbeing metric alone as a measure of the bare minimum of self-reliance - we recognise that self-reliance should not be equated solely with individual or household economic independence^{24,26}. Our economic wellbeing component is composed from a range of indicators in the survey, including the respondent's subjective assessment of the household's financial situation, the stability and predictability of income, ability to cover expenses from work, earner ratio, household savings and debt and a household asset index as proxy for wealth. We used principal component analysis to weight the answers to the selected survey questions. We then generated an economic wellbeing 'score', on a scale of 0 to 1, where 0 denoted the lowest possible economic wellbeing, and 1 the highest possible score.

The economic wellbeing scores for refugees in Nairobi, Addis Ababa and Amman are shown in Figure 7, alongside scores for the host population.

Figure 7: Box plot of economic wellbeing scores for displaced respondents in Addis Ababa, Amman and Nairobi.



Economic wellbeing scores for each country, showing refugees in camps and urban areas, and urban hosts, are shown in Figures 8, 9 and 10. Economic wellbeing, again on a scale of 0 to 1, is plotted on the horizontal axis. Bumps or peaks in the curves reveal clusters of similar scores. A smoother curve shows a more even distribution of economic wellbeing. The vertical line shows the median score for each population.

It should be noted that in all cities, there is an overlap between the displaced and their hosts. Some of the latter will clearly be struggling to get by, but they may be able to access forms of family or institutional support not available to refugees.

Figure 8: Distribution of economic wellbeing scores by migration status and location in Kenya

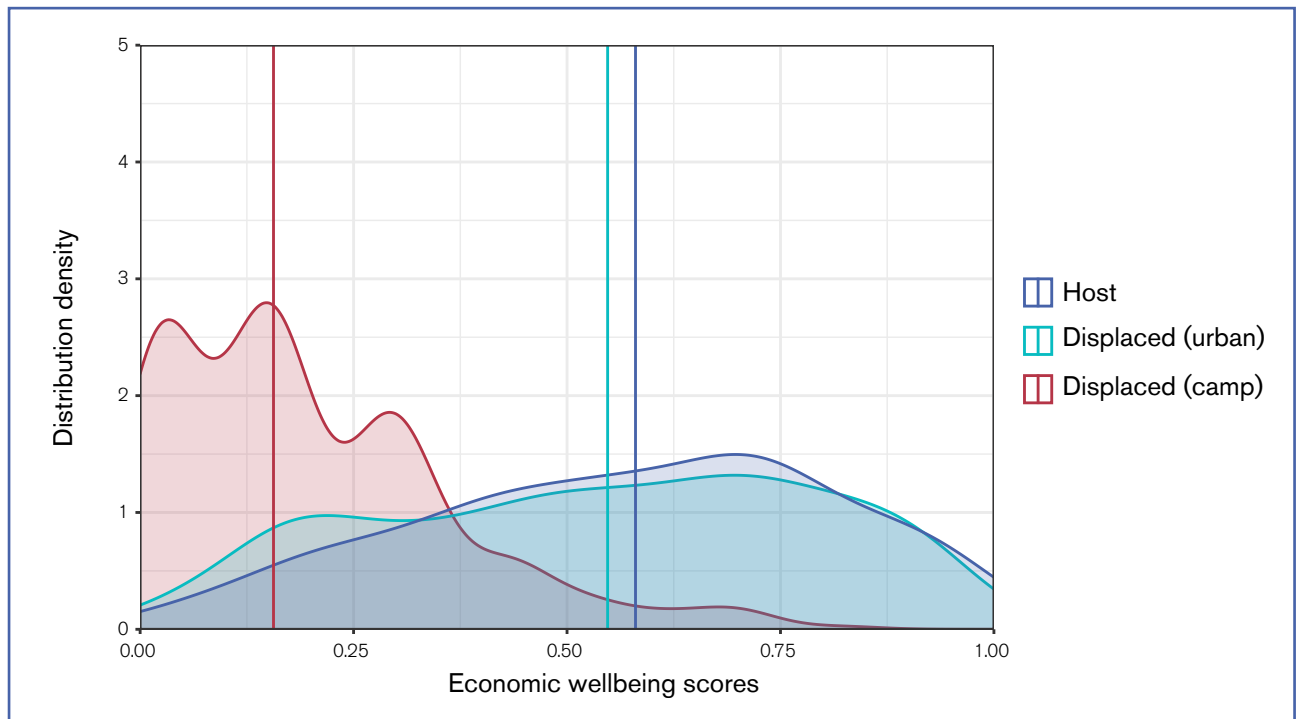


Figure 9: Distribution of economic wellbeing scores by migration status and location in Ethiopia

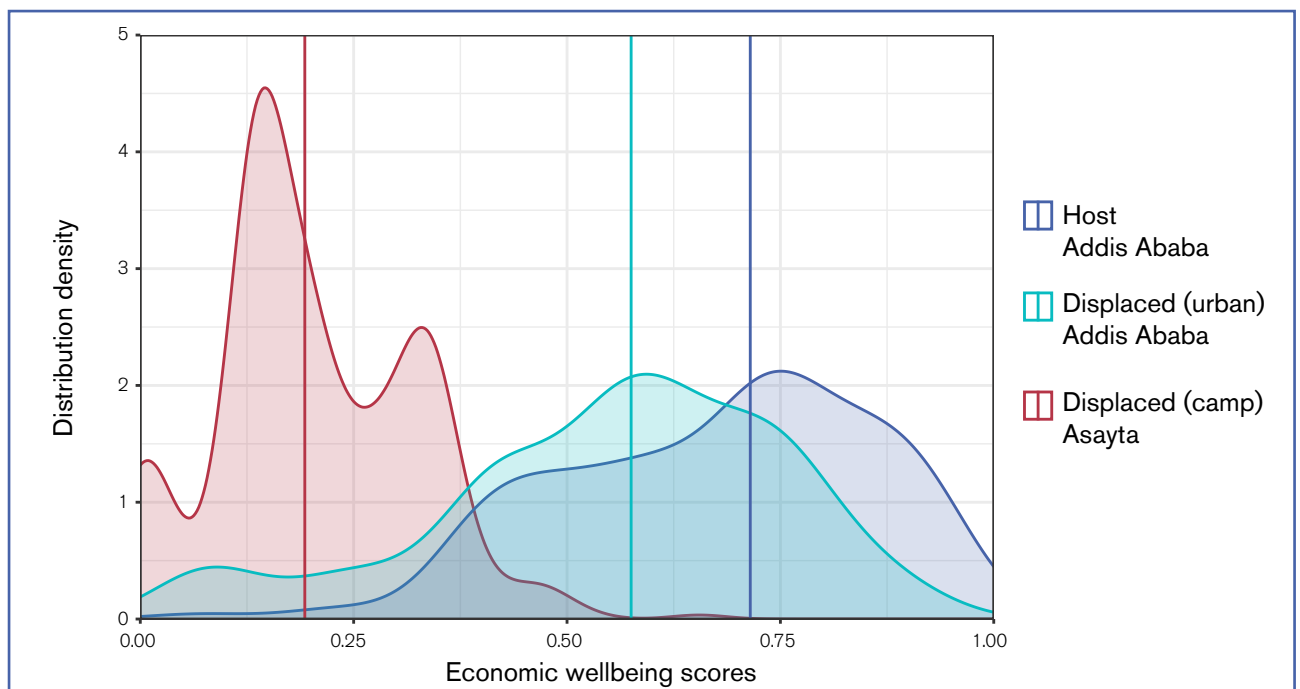
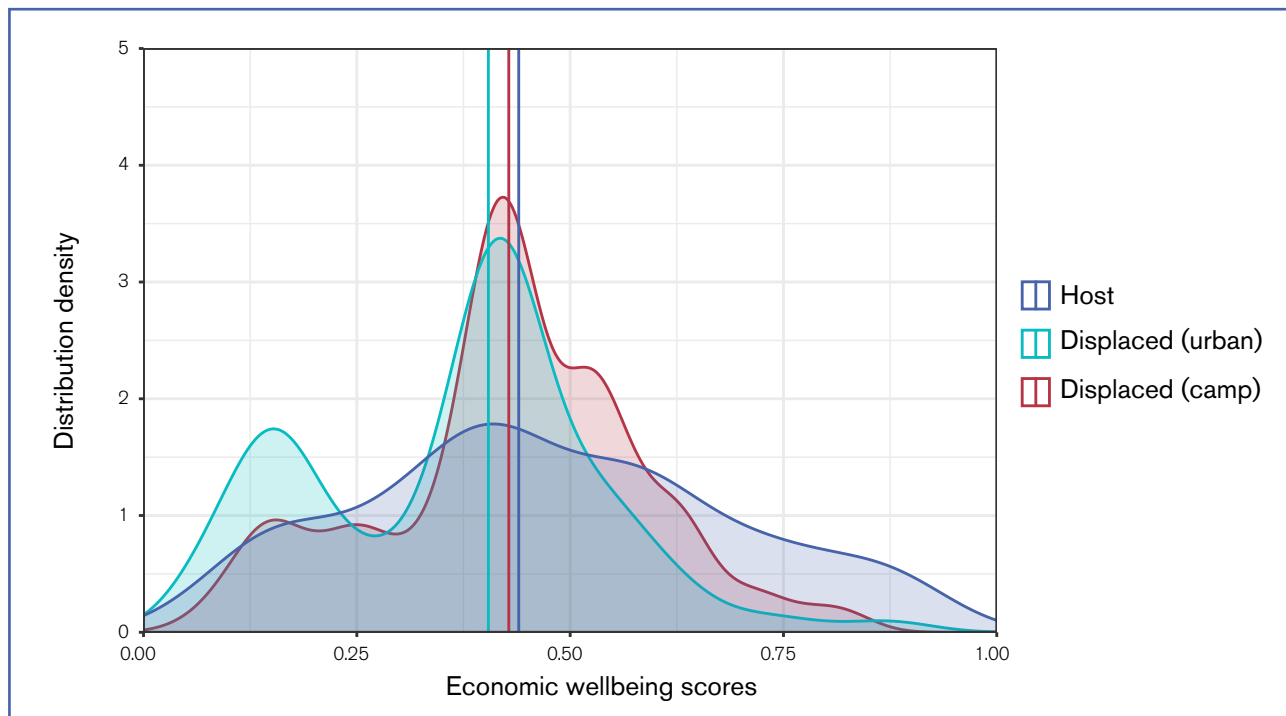


Figure 10: Distribution of economic wellbeing scores by migration status and location in Jordan



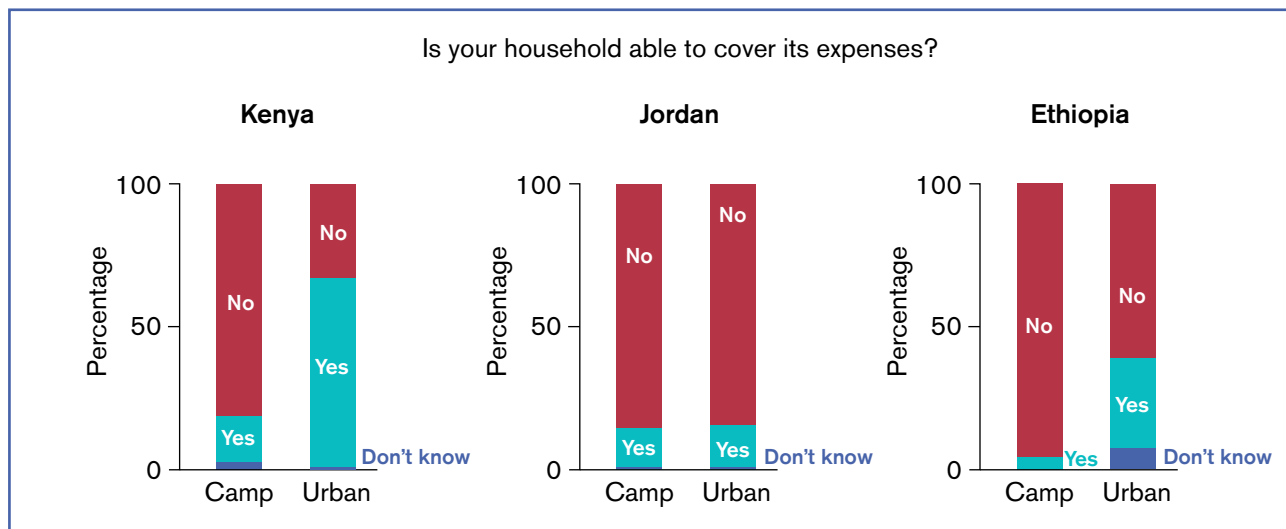
In Nairobi, it is noticeable that scores for refugees are widely distributed between low and high scores, meaning that there is great variation among refugees in the city, in terms of their economic wellbeing. This is in contrast to those in the camp, where people are very clearly clustered on the left-hand side of the graph, representing low economic wellbeing.

There is a similar picture in Addis Ababa, where there are also urban refugees with very low and very high scores, and everything in between. The median score for urban refugees in Ethiopia is similar to that in Nairobi, although the curve is steeper and a higher proportion of refugees in Addis are found towards the right-hand side of the graph, demonstrating higher economic wellbeing.

The situation is quite different in Amman, where there are two distinct groupings of urban refugees in the lower half of the scale. Notably, there are almost no urban refugees in the highest 25% of scores (the top quartile).

In general, however, the picture from the three cities is one where there is a wide spread of scores, meaning that while some refugees are doing quite well financially, there are others who are struggling. Digging into individual indicators within the economic wellbeing dimension also helps build a picture of the levels of self-reliance in cities. For example, in the survey we asked: Would you say your household is currently able to cover its expenses from income from work? The responses, shown in Figure 11, could be: Yes/No/Don't know or refuse to answer.

Figure 11: Yes/No responses, in percentage points, to the question 'Is your household able to cover its expenses?'



The situation varies significantly by country. In Kenya and Ethiopia the urban displaced are doing better than their camp counterparts, but there are significant proportions of the urban refugee population who say they can't cover their expenses (33% in Kenya and 61% in Ethiopia). In Jordan 84% of urban refugees and 86% of encamped refugees said they couldn't cover their expenses. Clearly, in Kenya and Ethiopia some urban refugees can be considered self-reliant, or on their way to achieving this, but it is far from a universal picture. Some households will be accumulating debt, will be at risk of eviction from rented properties, and will be adopting coping strategies that do damage, such as reducing their food intake.

We acknowledge that the camp-urban comparison may be impacted by selection bias: it is often argued that those who go to camps, or remain in them, are those who require assistance, while those who go to cities are more able to support themselves. These issues are explored in more detail in discussions of myths two and three.

Another selection bias might relate to where refugees have come from. Some research suggests that refugees with urban backgrounds tend to go to cities, and that once there do better than people of rural origin²⁷. Our data does not fully back up these findings. It is only in Ethiopia where people of rural origin have a clear preference for camps, and those of urban origin prefer cities. Regression analysis of our survey data shows that the economic wellbeing of displaced people in Jalalabad and Nairobi who are originally from urban environments is higher when compared with counterparts who are from rural areas. However, this was not the case in Addis Ababa or Amman. This remained true after controlling for education, gender and years in displacement.

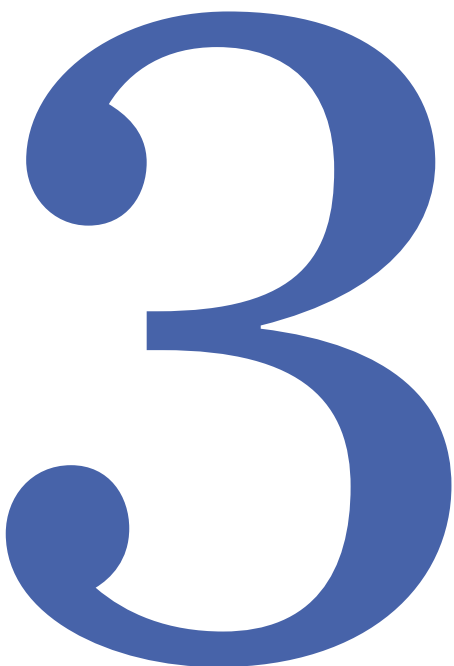
We also uncovered policy positions and institutional attitudes that actively work against self-reliance for urban refugees. These create psychological, physical and material stresses, and include discrimination, harassment, confiscation of goods, arbitrary arrest and the threat of refoulement or encampment. Our qualitative data shows that in every city, refugees — particularly those who are working — are affected by these issues. Notably, these are countries that signed up to be CRRF pilots (Ethiopia and Kenya) or that put in place high-profile policy initiatives that are explicitly aligned with the goal of self-reliance, as outlined in the GCR (Jordan).

Despite all the obstacles placed before urban refugees, they still manage, overall, to achieve better wellbeing than people in the camps in Kenya and Ethiopia (Figures 7 and 8). Rather than use this as an excuse to ignore urban refugees, aid agencies, local and national governments should be helping those who are struggling to get by, and should do so *in situ*. The Looking Forward section outlines such a shift, which would support many vulnerable refugees who are trying to work. Currently, when urban refugees request assistance, they are often rebuffed with the suggestion they return or move to the 'safe haven' of camp to receive services.

In Jordan, refugees in urban areas do not have better economic wellbeing than their counterparts in the camp. Zaatari camp has an advantage, as compared with the city, across most of the wellbeing components we measured. Jordan is one of few locations where urban refugees receive assistance. Despite this, many continue to struggle. Food rations are decreasing. Critically, even in urban areas, rations were never introduced alongside a plan to increase self-reliance, which would have allowed for a gradual phase-out. It is striking that in one of the few countries in the world where urban refugees receive humanitarian assistance and attention from policymakers and international agencies, seemingly very little has been done to improve refugees' ability to survive in the city without aid.

Myth Two: Those who go to cities are young, and better educated

How do populations differ between the camp and the city? Our data gives us an insight into the demographic characteristics of refugees in Kenya, Jordan and Ethiopia, and of IDPs in Afghanistan. This section explores data gathered through the PDUW study on the age and education levels of camp and urban displaced populations, and examines the differences (and similarities) between them.

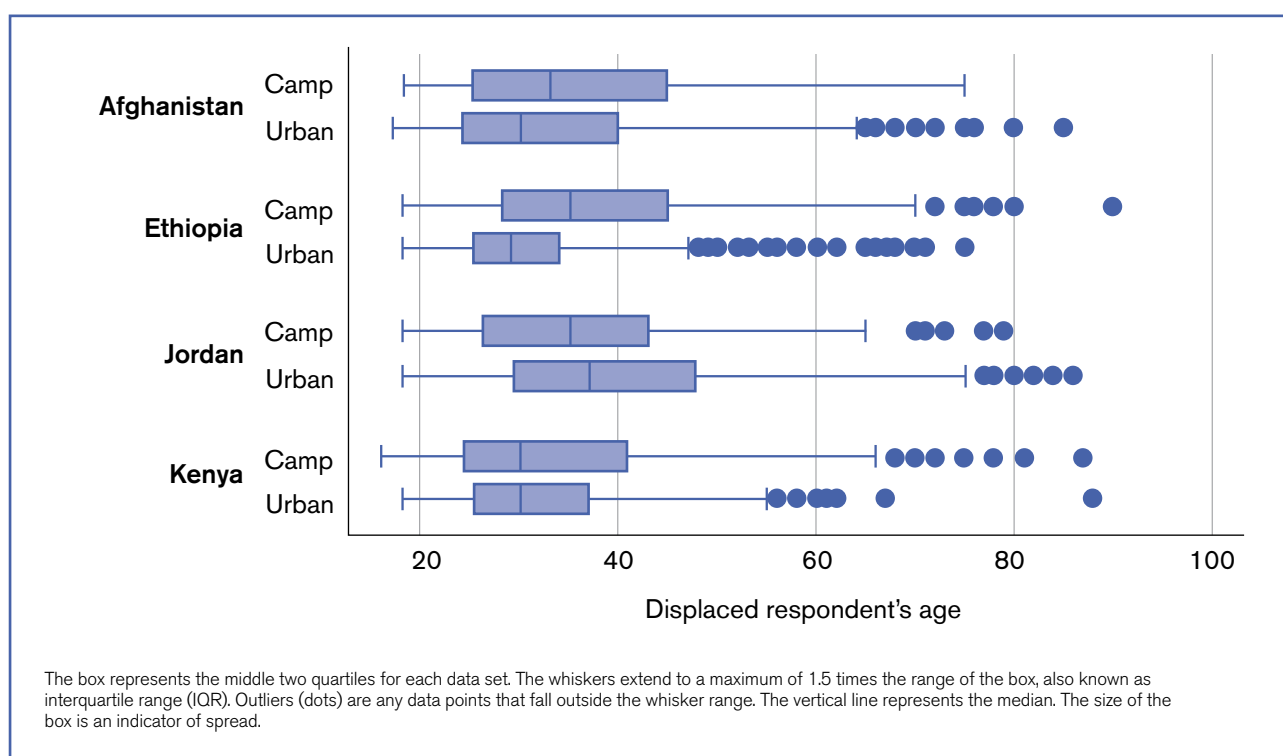


The argument that a certain 'type' of displaced person goes to cities has a long history. It features in UNHCR's 1997 urban refugee policy, in which refugees in towns and cities are considered a "global problem". The policy states that they are "predominantly young, single (or separated) males"²⁸. These claims still hold today, and were frequently levied at the PDUW research team. We were told that our results comparing populations in camps and urban areas would inevitably be skewed, as displaced populations in camps and urban areas are quite different. The concept relates to the idea of camp as safety net, discussed later. Vulnerable people are said to stay in the camps, while younger, male and better educated refugees leave or bypass the camps for the city.

We are not able to comment on whether more men than women are in the city, as we purposely sampled 50% men and 50% women. However, looking just at men, we can challenge the stereotype that most urban refugees are single. Only in Addis Ababa were the majority (81%) of men single. In Nairobi 51% were single and in Jordan just 14%.

Looking at age, the profile of refugees/IDPs was very similar across the camp and the urban sample in Kenya, Jordan and Afghanistan (note that we only surveyed adults over 18.) In Ethiopia the myth does hold to a certain extent: almost all respondents in the cities were under 40, while in the camp there is a wider spread of age groups. As noted earlier, in Ethiopia the urban and camp populations came from different ethnic groups, so some difference could be expected. Figure 12 shows the distribution of ages.

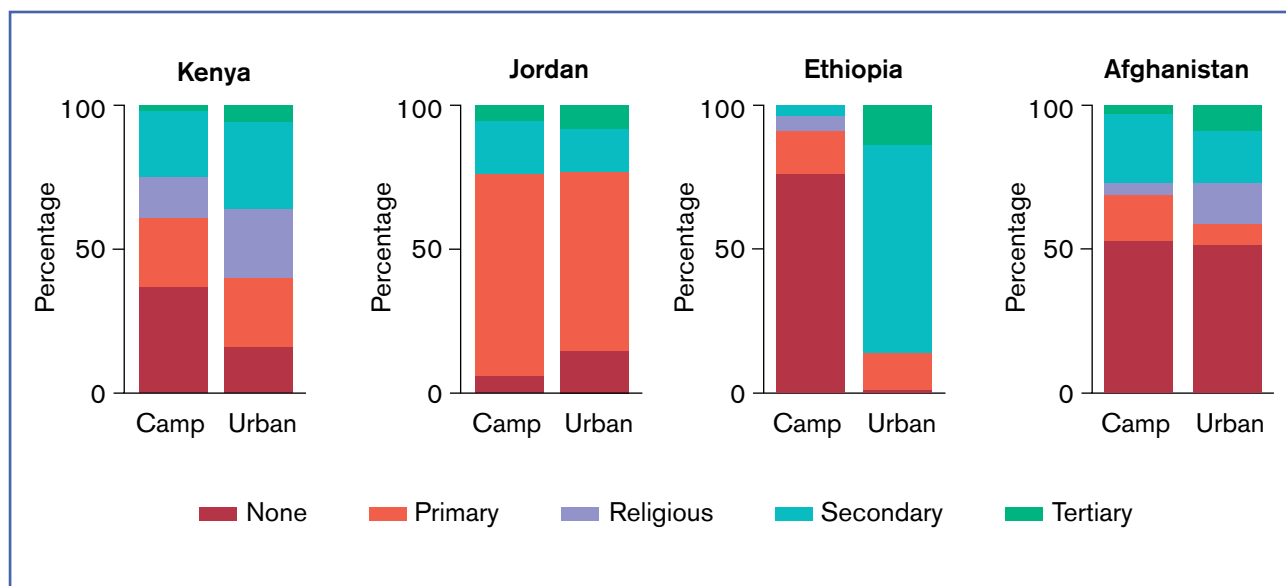
Figure 12: Boxplot showing the distribution of refugee and IDP respondents' ages, by location, for Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Jordan and Kenya.



The picture for education is mixed. Figure 13 shows types and levels of education declared by survey participants. Running counter to the myth, in Jordan, refugees in camp have higher levels of education than their counterparts in the city. In Zaatari, 35% of refugees have a secondary or tertiary education, compared with 23% in Amman. Further, the percentage of refugees with no education at all is higher in Amman than in Zaatari.

There are a number of possible explanations for the results in Jordan, including restrictions in the labour market that prevent certain professionals from working in their sphere of expertise. They may choose to live in the camp, being unable or unwilling to be employed in a different sector. Types of work that are open, legally, to refugees are lower skilled — in catering, agriculture and construction for example — which might explain why those with lower education have moved to the city. Clearly, there is much wasted human potential in the camp in Jordan.

Figure 13: Education levels of displaced respondents in Kenya, Jordan, Ethiopia and Afghanistan



In Afghanistan, education levels do not differ considerably between the IDP populations in Barikab – the camp-like settlement – and Jalalabad. In the city, people are more likely to have had a religious than a primary education, but the proportion with no education is almost identical between the two locations (52% in the camp, 51% in the city).

In Kenya the myth does hold, although people have a wide range of educational backgrounds in both locations. In Nairobi, 37% of refugees have secondary or tertiary education, as compared with 26% in Dadaab. There are also proportionally many more refugees in the camp who have no education at all: 42%, as compared with 21% in the city. However, in the course of our qualitative work, we interviewed a number of single women in Nairobi with little or no education. Contrary to the stereotype of the young, single, better-educated man that leaves the camp for the city, these women had made the decision to leave the camp, citing their children’s future prospects. They live a precarious life, hawking goods on the street. One told us:

“I only stayed for three nights in the camp during registration, after that I left. Because my intention was to come to Nairobi since I had young children and I had no one to support me. In the camp, it takes a lot of time from registration to being fully accepted and given accommodation and food. So, I thought I should just come directly to Nairobi and hustle for my children, since I wanted my children to get a better education.”
 - 38 year-old woman in Eastleigh

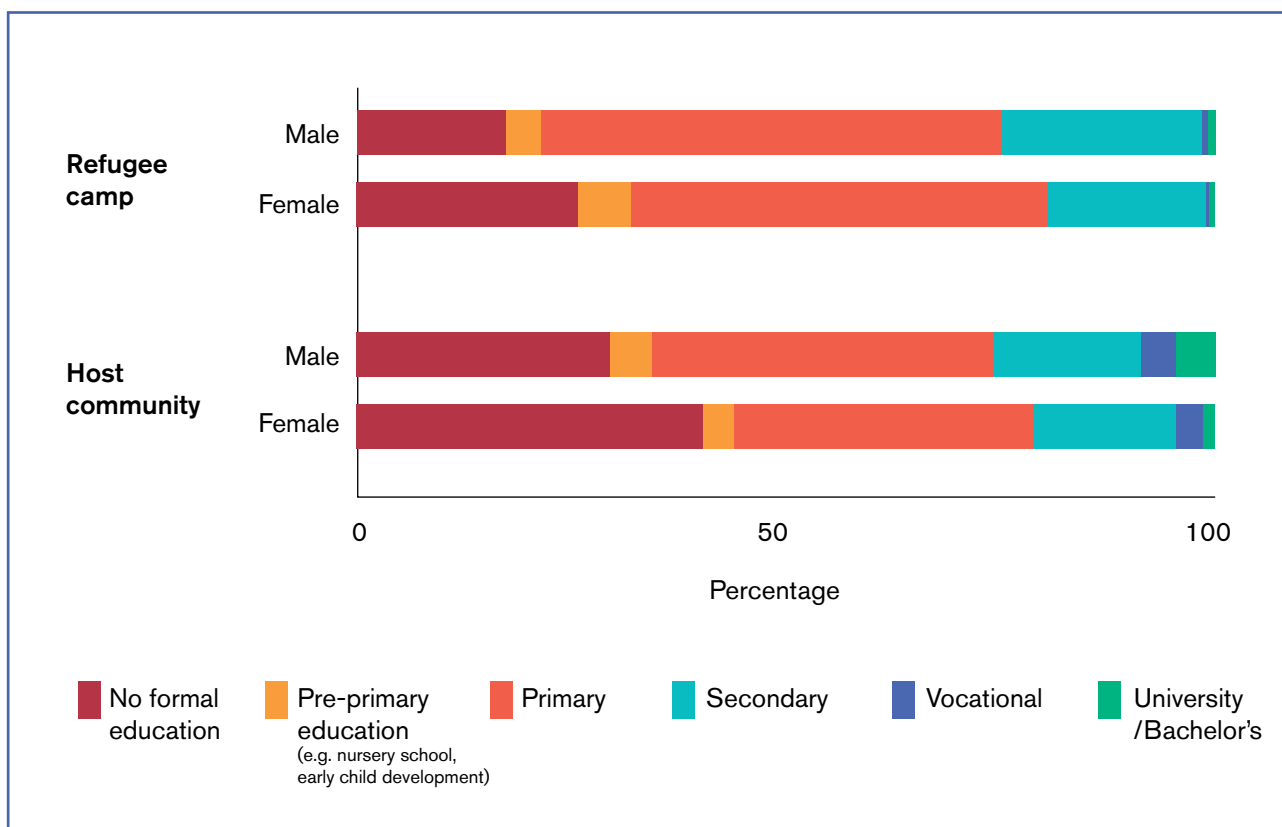


A Somali refugee sells tea on the streets in the Eastleigh neighbourhood of Nairobi.

Only in Ethiopia are there very stark differences between the camp and the urban locations sampled in the PDUW project, with 75% of camp-based refugees saying they have no education. Only 1% of the urban sample said the same. However, this reflects the different ethnicities between the Eritrean refugee populations in our sample. As previously noted, we intended to compare Tigrinya-speaking refugees in Addis and a camp in the Tigray region. After conflict broke out in 2020, camps in the region were destroyed,

and in order to complete our research, we carried out our fieldwork with Afari-speaking Eritrean refugees in Aysaita camp. The Afari people are pastoralists, and have a different educational profile to their Tigrinya-speaking compatriots. This can be seen by looking at data shown in Figure 14, collected in Hitsats camp in Tigray in April 2018 for a separate study. It shows that the majority of Tigrinya-speaking Eritrean refugees in the camp had at least a primary education.

Figure 14: Education profiles of Eritrean refugees in Hitsats camp and the host community, 2018.



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Rather than education or age being a key factor in who leaves or bypasses the camps, anecdotal evidence (and common sense) would suggest that it is people who have family and other connections in cities who find this route easiest. Leaving the camps in Kenya and Jordan - even for a day - requires a movement pass. Camps in Ethiopia are more open, but to leave permanently and legally, a refugee must be able to demonstrate that they are able to support themselves in the city. In order to meet this requirement, most will have a family member

or another individual who will vouch for them. While we were unable to explore the detailed family backgrounds of refugees we interviewed, it is possible that there are certain categories of people who, because of their ethnic group or lack of social connections, will be left behind in the camps, unable to leave despite wishing to. The negative impact of a lack of kinship or social networks on future generations of refugees will be discussed in Myth 3.

Myth Three: Camps act as safety nets for the most vulnerable

PDUW researchers were frequently told that camps are necessary to support the most vulnerable people: those who would not be able to manage without assistance in urban areas. We explore this myth via data on bodily wellbeing scores among urban and camp-based refugees, as well as through a more detailed examination of survey data on health, availability of healthcare and levels of nutrition.



The idea that camps act as a safety net – that they provide for the basics of refugees' existence – is in common currency and is widely referenced^{29,30}. It is built into the expression 'care and maintenance', often used to describe ongoing support for refugees in camps. UNHCR's *Fact Sheet on camps*³¹ states:

“While camps are not established to provide permanent solutions, they offer a safe haven for refugees and meet their most basic needs such as food, water, shelter, medical treatment and other basic services during emergencies.”

The refrain 'if refugees can't survive in the city then they can go/return to the camp to receive assistance' is not an official policy position (and indeed, runs counter to

UNHCR's *Alternatives to Camps Policy*³², but we heard it in very varied situations, often from the UN and from hosting governments. Officials giving key informant interviews reiterated the view.

We use the concept of 'bodily wellbeing' to explore this myth via PDUW survey data relating to physical health and security. As with economic wellbeing, indicators were selected to create a metric, based on principal component analysis, that scored respondents on a scale of 0 to 1. These indicators include self-reported levels of health, access to healthcare and basic services, food security, shelter quality and perceptions of security in the neighbourhood or camp. These scores are presented, by location and country, in Figures 15, 16 and 17.

Figure 15: Distribution of bodily wellbeing scores by migration status and location in Kenya

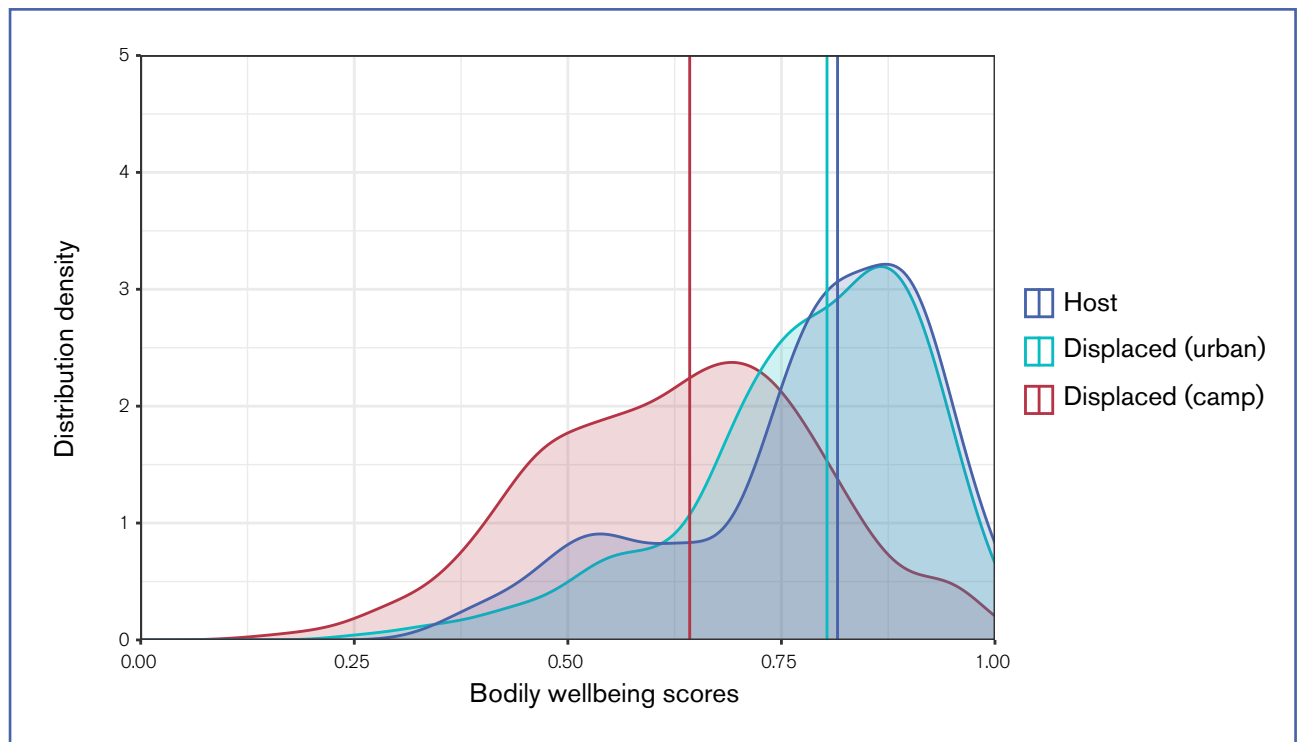


Figure 16: Distribution of bodily wellbeing scores by migration status and location in Ethiopia

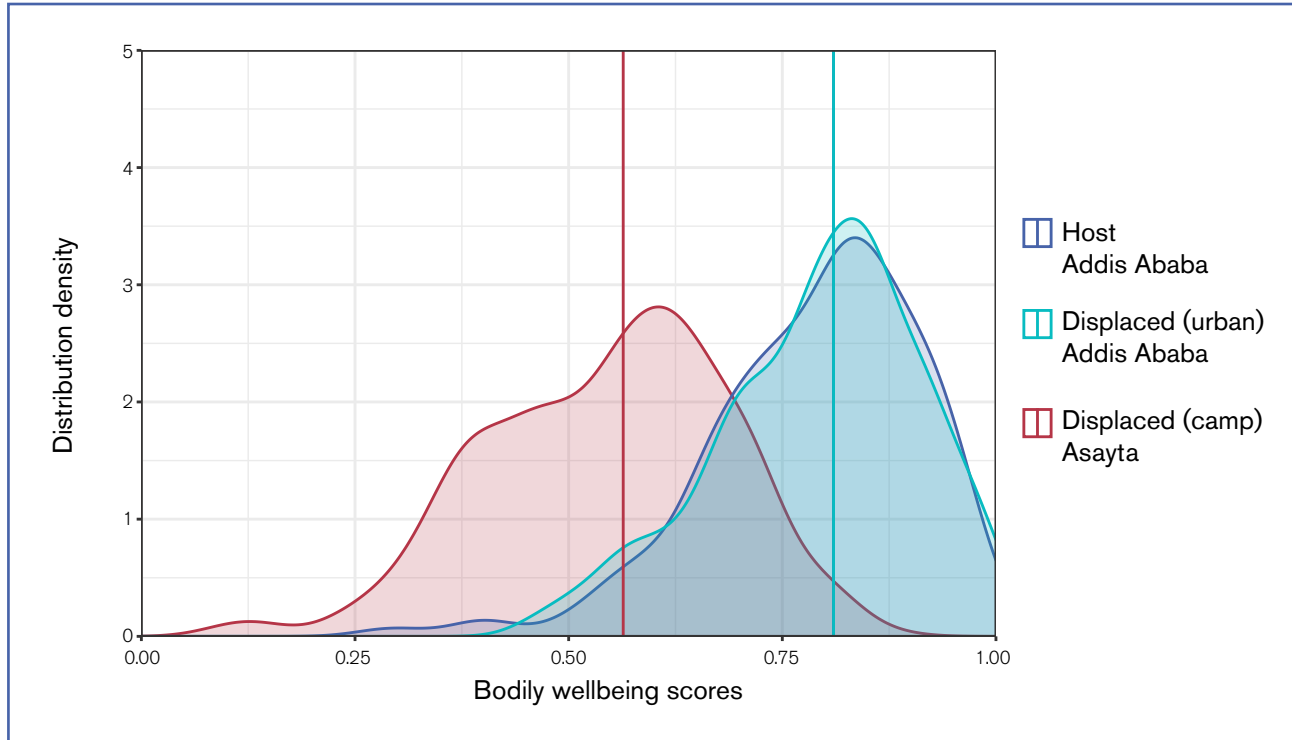
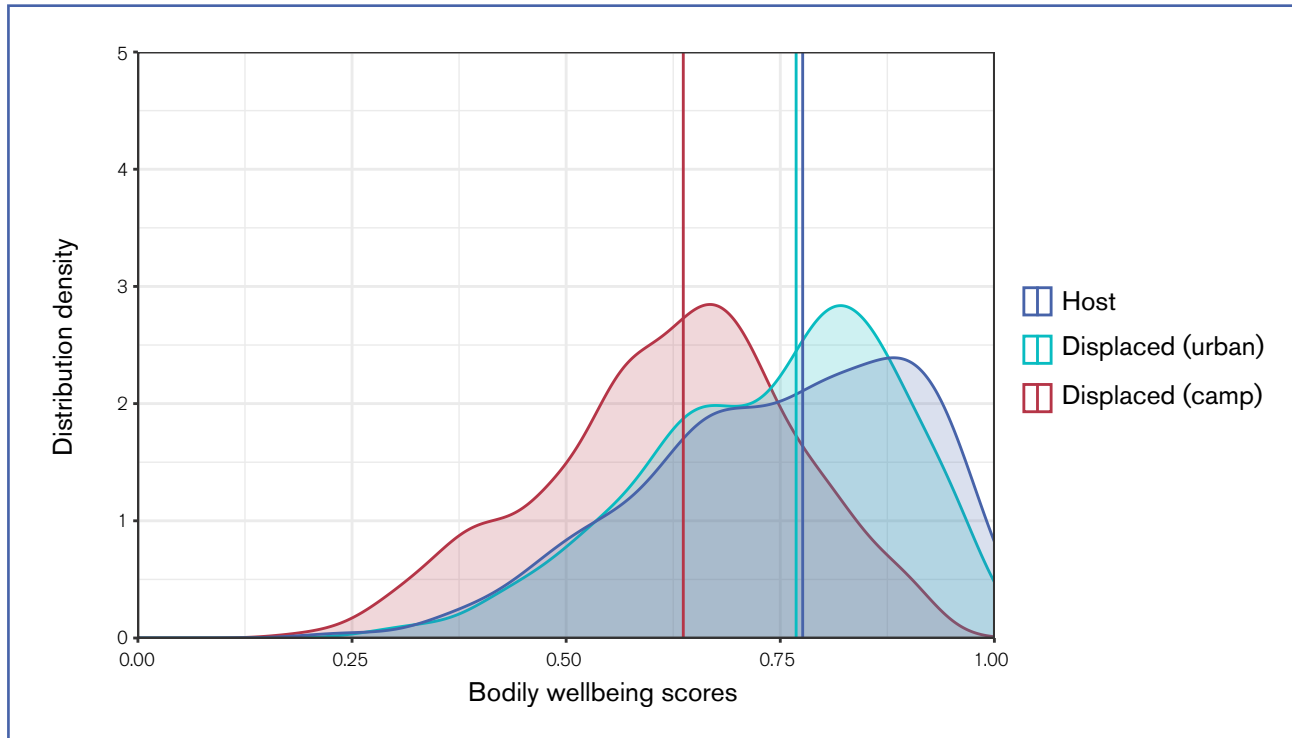


Figure 17: Distribution of bodily wellbeing scores by migration status and location in Jordan



These diagrams show that bodily wellbeing is significantly lower in the camps than the urban areas of our study, including in Jordan, where the other four elements of wellbeing are all higher in the camp.

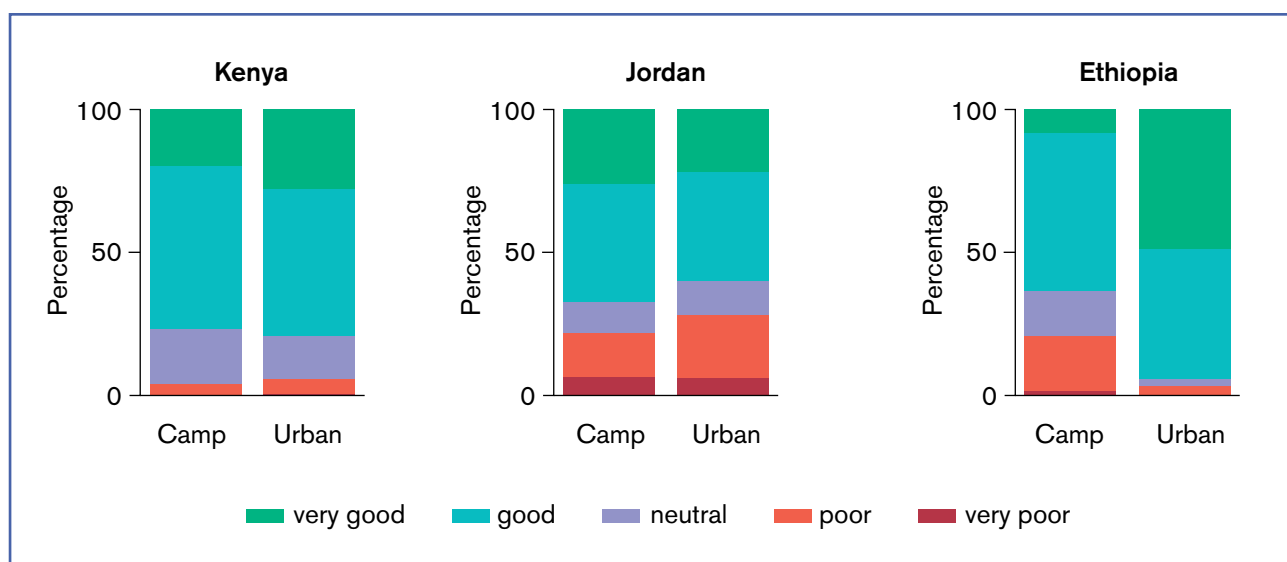
We recognise that it is often assumed that more vulnerable people stay in camps – older people, those in poorer health, single mothers. If this is true, then there may be an issue of selection bias in the bodily wellbeing scores, as it could be that the populations we are comparing are very different. However, we have demonstrated in the discussion of myth two that the age ranges are similar between the camps and the urban areas, and here we are again comparing equal numbers of men and women. Furthermore, we asked people to

rate their general state of health and found that their responses also challenge the idea that camp and urban populations are very different.

Assessments of self-reported health are shown in Figure 18. While this is a subjective measure, it is a widely used indicator, and regarded as a good predictor of future healthcare needs³³.

We found that urban displaced respondents across the three countries do report better health outcomes: 78% of them report having ‘good’ to ‘very good’ health compared to 69% in the camps. However, the profiles are remarkably similar between camps and urban areas, challenging the idea that we are comparing very different populations.

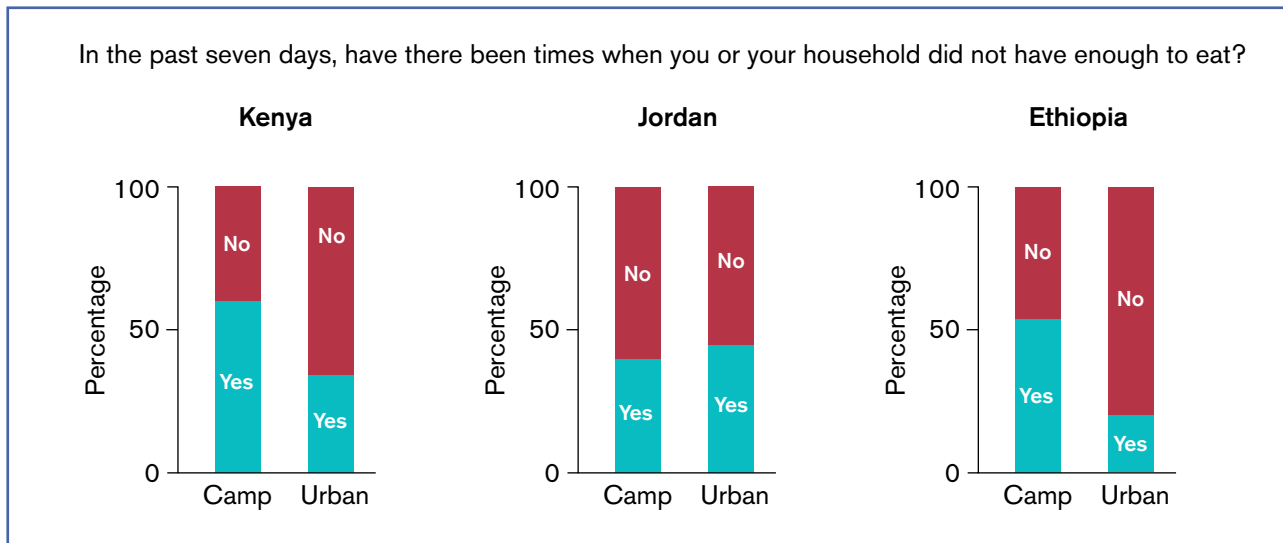
Figure 18: General state of health reported by refugees, by country



Our bodily wellbeing dimension included a number of indicators on access to services and availability of food, which are factors external to the intrinsic health or vulnerability of the different refugee populations. Looking in more detail, it appears that one of the main indicators driving the low scores in camps is food insecurity. While there are some urban refugees experiencing hunger, this is much more common and more severe in the camps.

Figure 19 provides the percentages of refugees who report not having had enough food in the previous seven days. It shows that 53% of refugees in Aysaita camp and 60% of refugees in Dadaab camp reported not having enough to eat in the week preceding the survey. In both cases, the situation was better for urban refugees. In Jordan, urban displaced respondents are slightly more likely to report food insecurities (45%) than their counterparts in the Zaatari camp (40%).

Figure 19: No/Yes responses, by percentage, to the question: “In the past seven days, have there been times when you or your household did not have enough to eat?”



These levels of hunger are one of the strongest arguments against ‘camps as a safety net’ that the PDUW study makes. When the international aid regime collaborates with a hosting government to build camps, restrictions on movement and work almost invariably come into play. Opportunities for subsistence farming are extremely limited in the camps we surveyed, because of the climate and terrain, or because

people lack the capital to invest in livestock. People in camps are thus forced to depend on humanitarian assistance, and most will receive food aid or cash for food. However, our survey shows that they are not receiving sufficient food to live healthy lives. International humanitarian assistance is, somewhat ironically, being used to force refugees to live in conditions that undermine their wellbeing.



A Somali refugee woman cooking in her home in Dadaab camp, Kenya.

There are also significant differences between camps and urban areas in response to the question 'Is healthcare available to you?'. Overall, 69% of people responded positively in the camps, as compared with 83% in the cities. Women were more likely to say they couldn't access healthcare. Data from qualitative interviews suggest that services and care for women during and after childbirth are particularly poor in the camps. There were also significant differences in satisfaction with access to pharmacies: 30% were very dissatisfied in the camps, as compared with 2.4% in the urban areas; 15% were very satisfied in the camps, whereas 43% were very satisfied in the urban areas.

There is also homelessness in refugee camps. Among our survey respondents there are camp-based residents in both Kenya and Ethiopia who stated that they had no shelter at all to live in. This is most likely explained by the fact that registration can take many months. UNHCR's latest update from Kenya (December 2022) shows an undocumented population of 87,194 people in Dadaab. In Ethiopia there is no information from UNHCR on this issue, but the latest operational report (May 2023) describes a significant shelter gap in Ethiopian camps, where 60% of the refugee population in the country live in emergency shelters or overcrowded shelters. Qualitative interviews from both Dadaab and Aysaita show that when the registration process is prolonged, it falls on other refugees to share what little they have. A 60-year old man in Aysaita told us:

"Registered refugees receive aid but the non-registered get nothing. Non-registered people are in difficult situation. There are many people looking for registration for years, but they didn't get any response from the authorities in charge. [...] Newcomers in the camp are not registered immediately. Then, they become dependent on families and relatives who are already registered and living in this camp."

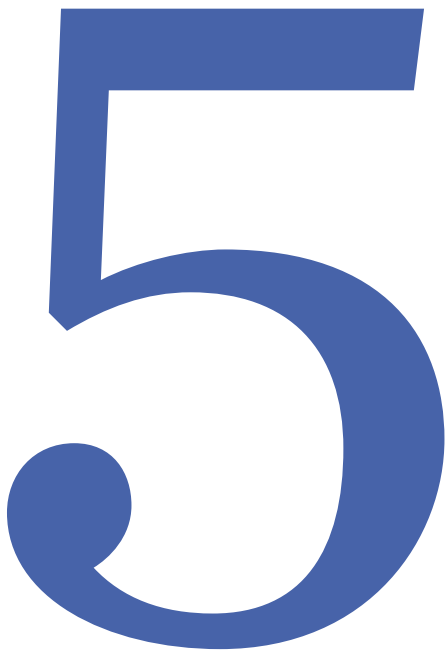
And a 29-year old woman in Dadaab explained:

"The unregistered people cannot get services. You will see them begging, moving house to house and we help them with what we have. They don't have houses, most of them live on the streets."

Bluntly put, camps are not acting as a 'safe haven' or safety net when people are routinely going hungry, cannot access adequate medical care and may be homeless for months or even years. Clearly camps serve a role in the acute phase of a displacement crisis, when refugees need life-saving support, but as with the camps in our study, they may remain in place long after the initial emergency phase has passed. This damages life chances for refugees – including over multiple generations. In the emergency phase, certain people crossing a border will be particularly vulnerable and deemed unable to manage in the city without assistance. An obvious example is a single woman caring for several young children. However, while that woman will rely on food rations, water and shelter in the camp to support herself and her young family, her children may grow up to find that they are not able to leave the camp. As a result of their mother's need for assistance (at a very particular stage of her life) that was only offered in a camp, her children may end up both dependent and vulnerable in adulthood, confined to the camp. We do not argue that life in a town or city is appropriate for all: many refugees may not aspire to this. The argument we make is that despite the flow of humanitarian funding to camps, assistance can be delivered patchily and, this can create (or exacerbate) vulnerability. It is a myth that basic needs are covered in a camp as a matter of course.

Myth Four: Camps can become stand-alone towns or municipalities where refugees and IDPs can live without aid

The idea that refugee or IDP camps can transform into functioning autonomous towns or cities, like any other urban area within the country, has entered the popular imagination. But they face serious structural challenges, not least because their development does not follow the logic of normal urban development. And because of this, they also do not offer the work or employment needed for self-reliance.



Very large refugee camps, such as Dadaab in Kenya or Zaatari in Jordan, are often compared to cities of similar sizes by the press and even by international organisations. For example, Dadaab has been called “the third largest city in Kenya”³⁴, and Zaatari “the fourth-largest city in Jordan”³⁵. The one-time camp manager of Zaatari, Kilian Kleinschmidt, even referred to himself as the Mayor of Zaatari³⁶.

The longevity of camps may be partially building this myth – some of the camps in the Dadaab complex date back to 1991. In the Middle East, Palestinian refugee camps built in the 1950s and 60s have slowly become surrounded by the urban fabric of neighbouring cities, giving them the appearance, superficially at least, of suburbs.

In addition, research has documented how refugees modify structures in camps, and recreate ostensibly urban ways of life³⁷. A detailed ethnography of Kakuma Camp (established in 1992 to house mainly Sudanese refugees) in Kenya³⁸ described an “accidental city” where, despite physical and legal restrictions, refugees build rich political, social and economic lives. Aspects of this “humanitarian urbanism” included livelihood diversification and entrepreneurial activities such as trade, bartering, and providing services such as catering or entertainment. Social strata and cosmopolitanism seemed to be emerging, as people of different nationalities and income backgrounds met and mingled.

However, beneath these superficial similarities are some entrenched structural differences that prevent a camp like Kakuma from evolving into a self-sustaining city. One of the principal barriers is that camps’ roles are not the same as the roles urban centres naturally play as regions develop³⁹. Refugee camps are generally purposefully built far from industry or existing urban centres, near borders, or in other remote regions. They are designed to ensure their residents are dependent on international assistance, rather than able to take advantage of housing and labour markets, or access existing services. Political considerations governing where IDP camps form will likely differ from those governing the siting of refugee camps, and will vary with the situation. However, Barikab in Afghanistan faces some similar problems to the refugee camps in the other countries we studied.

Despite the challenges, donors’ ambitions for the camp-like ‘settlement’ of Kalobeyei, adjacent to Kakuma camp have taken an explicitly urban approach⁴⁰. Kalobeyei was opened in 2016, a few kilometres from older Kakuma. It is guided by the Kalobeyei Integrated Social and Economic Development Programme (KISEDPP), led by the Kenyan national and Turkana

county governments, with UNHCR. The settlement was designed to offer integrated, market-based opportunities to both refugees and the host community, and to support self-reliance⁴¹. Donors include the EU Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF). The overall budget for Phase 1 was estimated by UNHCR at US\$500m (2018-2022). A preparatory phase ran from 2016-18.

The KISEDPP plan includes integrated service delivery, skills development, protection, spatial planning, infrastructure, agriculture, livestock, natural resource management, energy, and private-sector development⁴⁰. A separate US\$25m five-year Challenge Fund launched by the World Bank in 2019 aimed to support a range of enterprises to do business in Kakuma, running alongside the Prospects programme (2019-2023), supported by the Government of the Netherlands in collaboration with the World Bank, ILO and UNICEF that sought to promote inclusive jobs and education.

Regular evaluations of Kalobeyei are taking place, but there is little publicly available evidence of progress towards self-reliance. A lesson-learning paper for Phase II of the EUTF support references a programme entitled ‘Enhancing self-reliance for refugees and host communities in Kenya’, which was to provide infrastructure support for Kalobeyei, including for urban development and roads, and was to incentivise private sector investments. But it notes only that it has been highly visible and “risky”⁴². The executive summary of a mid-term review of the preparatory phase published in 2018 notes “weak design from the start”⁴³. And a three-year study published in 2019 records that enabling factors for self-reliance were “too weak to offer a realistic prospect of refugee self-reliance in the short run”⁴⁴.

One of the biggest socio-economic challenges is employment. Refugees who arrived in the area at around the same time, but who were either accommodated in Kakuma camp or in Kalobeyei settlement, had no better assets or employment among the settlement cohort⁴⁴. A review of secondary literature describes the ambitions for Kalobeyei as “an incompatible amalgamation of a grand development vision, speaking about inclusion, mobility, and economic development, to be carried out in a much restricted and economically harsh environment”⁴⁰. An even more damning critique says “surface reforms” have “failed to effect systemic change towards undoing the carceral violence of forced immobility, life-time extraction, and exclusion”⁴⁵. Despite such assessments, attempts to ‘urbanise’ camps continue, the latest idea being to elevate the camp complexes in Dadaab and Kakuma/Kalobeyei to municipality status ‘to attract investors’⁴⁶.

Turkana County, which hosts the Kakuma/Kalobeyei camp-settlements, is sparsely populated, and its towns, including the capital Lodwar, have fewer than 50,000 residents. These are a fraction of the size of the camp/settlement complex, which had 196,666 residents in 2020⁴⁷. In addition, Lodwar is on an established trade route, by a lake, and has more diverse livelihood options than are typically found in Turkana County. Turkana is classified as 80% arid or very arid, and is mainly populated by semi-nomadic pastoralists. It is not easy to see how the area where the camp complex is located could sustain independent livelihoods for such a large population. And without modifications to restrictions on movement, it is not clear how municipal status will make any significant change to the lives of refugees in the camps.

PDUW research on refugee enterprise in camps also points to structural issues that would prevent camps morphing into towns or cities. Mobility restrictions, which are intrinsic to encampment policies, severely limit business profitability and the availability of paid work. Where refugees require passes to leave the camps, for example, business owners must find ways to bring in goods, often requiring middlemen. This puts up prices. That is problematic in such a cash-poor environment. In Afghanistan, IDP movement for Barikab is not restricted. But transport is prohibitively expensive for many Barikab residents. Even if mobility restrictions were eased in the refugee contexts, it is not clear that residents would be able to survive (let alone thrive) without humanitarian assistance. The remoteness of the camps in our study from existing urban centres is a key barrier to profitable trade, or the emergence of sustainable industry. Dadaab, for example, is 100km from Garissa town – a four-hour drive according to our interviewees in the camp. Barikab is 45km from Kabul and transport options are limited, often to private taxis. Aysaita is close to Semera town, the capital of the Afar region,

BOX 2. BARIKAB – A SHORT HISTORY AND CAUTIONARY TALE

Barikab is a settlement designed for Afghans who were formerly refugees in Iran and Pakistan (referred to as returnees); for people displaced within the country through violence or conflict; and for the widows of government security forces killed in action. It is 45 kilometres north of Kabul city. Land distribution and housing construction began in 2007, with the government relocating IDPs to Barikab and providing them with housing for free.

Barikab encompasses two sites adjacent to each other. Aliceghan was named to reflect support from Australia over the settlement's first decade: the Australian government originally envisioned the settlement as a model for other Land Allocation Scheme townships across Afghanistan. The other site is Khalil Khalil. The original plans proposed 1,400 houses for 1,400 eligible families. In 2016, there was a proposal to expand the settlement to incorporate 13,000 homes. However, the settlement has been beset by problems – notably unreliable water supply, lack of employment opportunities and poor transport connections. As a result, many of the houses that were constructed have been abandoned, or remain unoccupied (Figure 19). According to community leaders interviewed by Samuel Hall, there were about 700 households (around 4,900 people) split roughly evenly between Khalil Khalil and Aliceghan by 2020.

but it has a population of only around 10,000 people. Zaatari, located in the desert, is nearer to a significantly sized urban centre – it is 12km from Mafrq City, the provincial capital, with regular bus connections.



Abandoned homes in Barikab settlement, Afghanistan.

PDUW data on levels of work in the camps also casts doubt over the idea that refugees could become self-reliant in camps that function as autonomous towns. Our data shows a huge disparity in economic wellbeing between displaced people in camps and their counterparts in urban areas, with the exception of Jordan (see discussion below). Our data also shows that it is much more likely that households in camps will have no working members, as compared with the city.

In addition, the PDUW study of displacement economies demonstrates the poor connectivity and potential of camp-based economies, which serve only the camp clientele. They are in contrast to the interlinked nature of livelihoods and refugee-run enterprise that occur in urban areas, where displaced people can more readily draw on social and trading networks as a foundation for finding paid work or setting up an enterprise.

The very limited availability of paid work means that, where camps have been in place for several decades, generations will have grown up without having earned an income. The 'jobs' that do exist are generally short-term 'incentive' positions with NGOs, providing assistance and services to the camp population. The incentive is often less than a wage, and is paid to acknowledge the efforts of people who are effectively volunteers⁴⁸. The nature of work within the camp suggests that if NGO employers withdrew, and humanitarian assistance ended, already-low incomes would rapidly decline, further exacerbating hunger.

A fundamental flaw in current plans for the economic development of Kakuma-Kalobeyei was a failure to 'examine or control for a gradual phasing out of humanitarian assistance'⁴⁰. It seems highly unlikely that any of the camps in our study will become urban centres in the immediate to medium-term. To achieve sustainability, tens of thousands of men and women would need to find work or other income-earning opportunities in desert or semi-desert regions where there is no significant industry, and where local populations (if they exist at all) are often pastoralists.

However, in Jordan the differences in economic wellbeing between refugees in Amman and in Zaatari camp were less stark. Indeed, our data show similarities across all dimensions of wellbeing in Jordan, unlike other countries in the PDUW study. Put simply, if you are forced to live long-term in a camp, Zaatari may be one of the best places to be. The camp is relatively well-positioned – only 12km to the nearest significant town – and some residents are able to leave the camp for work on a daily or more intermittent basis. There is also some trade between the camp and populations outside.

UN reports make much of the estimated 1,800 businesses set up in the camp by refugees along a 3km stretch of road⁴⁹. But without rent or utility bills for shopkeepers, the economy is heavily subsidised and largely artificial. Notably, 49% of residents with work in our survey of the camp said their 'employers' (often offering only incentive work) were international agencies and NGOs.

It is very hard to gauge amounts of funding channelled to camps. Such information is rarely disaggregated geographically or made publicly available. However, the Government of Jordan has managed to maintain relatively high levels of funding for the response to Syrian refugees. The costs of the camp have been enormous: in 2013 it was estimated that Zaatari cost US\$500,000 a day to run⁵⁰. A related IIED study of water sanitation and hygiene (WASH) in Zaatari camp has shown that camp residents get water at levels similar to people living in Mafraq City. This is a remarkable achievement, given the desert location of the camp, and Jordan's overall water scarcity. Nevertheless, the price tag is immense (potentially incalculable), and it is not clear whether current levels of wellbeing in the camps can be maintained. Donors are already unwilling to replace degraded temporary infrastructure, notably the prefabricated 'caravans' where refugees live. Food rations were reduced in Zaatari for the first time in July 2023 (the World Food Programme reduced rations outside of camps after COVID-19, due to funding shortfalls). It seems unlikely that the relatively supportive conditions in the camp will be maintained for many more years.

Ignoring the city: missed opportunities to support refugees in the informal sector

The myth of camps as cities has become entwined with the myth of self-reliance, generating the illusion that somehow, even without free movement or full rights to work, a broad segment of the refugee population can become economically independent, regardless of structural impediments. Meanwhile, the international community is missing opportunities to support vulnerable refugees to achieve decent livelihoods in towns and cities.



Given the very obvious unsustainability of refugee camps around the world, why does the myth that they could be somehow turned into cities still exist – and even receive funding? It becomes entwined with the myth of self-reliance – that somehow, without free movement or full rights to work, a broad segment of the refugee population can become economically independent, regardless of the structural impediments to this.

In Kenya, the national government faces pressures to show progress against the four pillars of the Global Compact on Refugees, and the Kalobeyi experiment is seen as a “an attempt to materialise the essence” of the Compact⁴⁰. Donors’ budgets are stretched and, with no end in sight to the conflicts that triggered refugee movements, they are keen to reduce reliance on humanitarian assistance.

Other recent high-profile initiatives focusing on refugee livelihoods are also curiously anti-urban: Jordan and Ethiopia have also launched Compacts – pledges made on the part of governments, backed up by donor support. Both focus on creating opportunities for formal employment. When announced, they were lauded as concrete steps towards the Global Compact for Refugees (although note that Jordan is not an official signatory to the process). They include commitments to increase the numbers of work permits issued to refugees, and to create new jobs in industrial parks and special economic zones (SEZs) with a quota for refugees.

The Jordan Compact has been well-examined in the policy and academic literature (see below). The Ethiopia Jobs Compact, announced in 2016, has made limited progress and has been relatively sparsely covered^{51,52}.

Formal v. informal work

The Jordan Compact has been criticised for its remoteness from on-the-ground realities⁵³. For example, it provides for 200,000 work permits for Syrian refugees. But there is very limited interest among Syrians in taking up formal jobs in the SEZs. The jobs are poorly paid, located far from areas where Syrians are living, and the onsite accommodation is not appropriate for most refugees’ family circumstances. The Compact also fails to recognise the high level of informalisation of the Jordanian economy (among Jordanians as well as foreign workers). With so much informal labour available, “employers lack a clear financial incentive to employ Syrians formally”⁵³.

Our own research also confirms Syrian refugees’ limited interest in formalising their working conditions. Most work permits tie the worker to specific employers, and can lead to exploitative relationships (although legislative changes now allow greater flexibility for refugees working in construction and agriculture).

Of the Syrian refugees in our survey who wanted to work, but were unable to, few regarded the lack of a work permit as a key barrier. Only 7.5% of urban refugees surveyed in the Sweileh neighbourhood of Amman considered not having a permit an impediment to finding work. Lack of work permits was considered a factor by 13% of urban refugees in Ethiopia seeking work, and 15% in Kenya.

The situation in Jordan, with low take-up of work permits, resonates with more general observations of the relationship between rights to work and refugees’ entry into formal employment. Certainly, how far legal status actually enables livelihoods is not clear⁵⁴. However, refugees’ engagement in informal work often mirrors that of the host population, even where refugees have the formal right to work⁵⁵. Across the countries in the PDUW study, rates of informal work are high. In Kenya, around 83% of all employment opportunities are informal⁵⁶. Estimates for Jordan suggest that 51% of the labour force works in the informal sector⁵⁷ and for Ethiopia this figure is estimated at 85.2%⁵⁸.

Informality is stigmatised

In cities, the informal economy provides opportunities for refugees to earn an income. But it is frequently stigmatised in the literature (see Box 3). Refugees may be particularly vulnerable in the informal sector because of general insecurity related to their legal status, but host populations will also experience similar issues.

BOX 3. A NEGATIVE TAKE ON INFORMALITY

Policy and academic texts on refugee livelihoods often use the language of compulsion, giving the negative side of the informal economy prominence. For example:

“Refugees are pushed into the informal economy where the possibility of exploitation and abuse is higher and legal recourse is non-existent.”⁵⁹

“Refugees are pushed into informal labour markets, with its associated risks of exploitation, child labour and physical, sexual and gender-based violence.”⁶⁰

“There is no explicit guidance on programme adjustment when the only option for refugees is the informal economy and the likelihood of exploitation, abuse and non-sustainability is always high.”²⁶

“...refugees working in the informal sector experience low and declining wages (often because of oversupply of labor), longer working days, poorer working conditions and less protection, and increased labor exploitation irrespective of overall economic conditions.”⁵⁵

Given this, the logical conclusion for authors writing about refugees' engagement in the informal sector, is to recommend steps towards formalising work. They may believe, for example, that this will "leverage the potential found in the informal sector into productive engagement in the formal sector"⁵⁵. But this fails to engage with urban economies as they actually exist, and to look at other barriers – beyond legal ones – to safe and dignified livelihoods.

Policy initiatives should, therefore, focus on improving working conditions for all informal workers, rather than overlooking an important source of livelihoods for refugees.

It can sometimes seem that NGOs running livelihoods programmes for urban refugees are themselves unsure whether to focus on informal or formal employment opportunities. Programming generally takes the form of vocational education and skills development, entrepreneurship and business skills training, job placements and apprenticeships^{26,15}. While job placements and apprenticeships are more obviously oriented towards the formal sector, vocational and business training may focus on supporting refugees to enter either formal or informal job markets, or to establish/increase profitability of formal or informal business. However, much programming literature is curiously unspecific about whether 'beneficiaries' will be working formally or informally – perhaps because of the negativity expressed about the informal economy, and the implication that refugees may be working illegally. The specific challenges refugees might face as informal sector workers or entrepreneurs, and how these might be addressed, are left unarticulated.

Many livelihoods programmes have been severely criticised for extremely limited follow-up to ascertain the impact that they have had on people's employability or incomes^{16,15}. To a number of observers, the failure to examine the impacts of training suggests that they are ends in themselves: a tick-box exercise on the part of donors, UN or NGOs, rather than a meaningful attempt to improve refugee livelihoods, formal or otherwise^{61,62}. This tallies with stated experiences of urban refugee entrepreneurs in Amman interviewed as part of the PDUW study. They were unconvinced of the value of training offered by NGOs. They noted that it appeared to focus on specific professions and was primarily oriented towards getting work permits.

Overlooked opportunities

This lack of explicit engagement with the realities of urban refugees' livelihood experiences is also a failure to understand the workings of informal businesses. It suggests that opportunities have been missed to remove some of the barriers to profitability and better working conditions.

The PDUW study had a particular emphasis on refugee enterprise – a livelihood strategy programming often overlooks in favour of employment. A number of refugees in our qualitative sample had chosen to set up their own businesses as a response to discrimination and poor working conditions as employees. Women may choose to run a small business from the home as it is a type of work that is compatible with caring responsibilities and/or does not contravene social norms that discourage them from interacting with strangers outside the home. This was often the case with Syrian female own account workers in Amman. By contrast, women in Nairobi take up trading or street hawking, especially when their language abilities, levels of literacy and/or lack of experience preclude them from other types of work or business: 30 out of 34 street vendors in the PDUW survey in Nairobi were women.

The PDUW study found numerous and wide-ranging benefits of refugee enterprise, including creating employment and training opportunities for other refugees and hosts, and increasing feelings of self-worth within the community. Refugees often spoke with pride of running a business, and the psychological benefit that came with the sense of purpose and achievement. This was noticeable among women and men – particularly among Syrian women, who have found greater autonomy through running an enterprise: something that would have been much more difficult in their country of origin.

Urban business potential, and also risks

From the studies of displacement enterprise, the variety and economic potential of refugee-run businesses in urban areas was striking. While camp economies were largely restricted to serving a local population, enterprises in cities were involved in a wide range of sectors. In Amman, male refugees often worked in construction trades, furniture making or tailoring, while women were involved in home-based work such as embroidery or preparation of food for sale. In Addis Ababa, trade focused on the leisure sector, and included pool halls, bars, restaurants, game zones and transport. In Nairobi the clothes retailing sector dominated, with several refugees running wholesale enterprises, and exporting goods throughout the region and even to the US via internet sales. All the urban refugee economies showed some potential to work beyond their immediate neighbourhoods. Camp economies, in contrast, were small-scale with a clientele inside the camp – only in Zaatari did we find some businesses working beyond the camp.

However, although setting up a business or being an own-account worker offers opportunities to refugees, it is not without risks. In all three refugee-hosting countries in the study (Kenya, Ethiopia and Jordan), we found that refugee entrepreneurs were circumventing restrictions by entering into partnership with a host country national. These partnerships were often unstable or exploitative. The host may have simply taken a percentage of profit, but with legal ownership rights they could walk away from the agreement at any time.

Own account workers are often exposed to fines or are harassed or asked for bribes. In Nairobi, while refugees are legally permitted to register their businesses, in practice the process is complicated and many are unable to meet the documentation requirements⁶¹. Refugees running businesses are under constant scrutiny from the police force and county inspection authority, looking to fine them or asking for bribes, payable daily or weekly. One female refugee entrepreneur from Eastleigh, told us:

“Eastleigh has become an ATM for the police and kanjo [metropolitan police] because they know refugees do not want any trouble with the authorities and would rather give them the little money they have. This is difficult, even more when the refugees are trying to make ends meet.”

Street vendors in Eastleigh are particularly vulnerable to police extortion and brutality. Many are women who do not speak Kiswahili. They are routinely asked for money, have their goods confiscated, are chased off the streets and sometimes teargassed, by the *kanjos*. In addition, refugees may be threatened with deportation for not possessing the right documentation. Many street hawkers work after dark to avoid being chased by the police during standard opening hours. But assaults and robberies are common. Police harassment may be exacerbated by the informal nature of refugees' businesses, or their lack of correct refugee paperwork (i.e. having expired movement passes or not being registered as urban refugees), but discrimination and extortion have become institutionalised. Even legal businesses are subject to this treatment⁶¹.

In Addis Ababa, refugees interviewed in Gofa Mebrat Haile neighbourhood said theft and insecurity were common, affecting their businesses. Eritrean refugees complain that their reports to the police are not investigated and that harassment, extortion, and threats from the security forces are also frequent, whether they have their business registered or not. One female entrepreneur told us:

“Whenever a refugee is reported or caught under the claim of any wrong doing, the policemen always ask for money. Any policeman can keep a refugee under custody so as to get bribe from the refugee even without any tangible wrongdoing.”

Female refugees in Addis Ababa also believe that being a woman increases the chances of being robbed or not paid for their goods and services. The lack of physical strength to see off aggressors, and their experience of police inaction, contribute to their perception of general insecurity in the city.

In Jordan, refugees were more likely to note that police turn a blind eye to informal business activity. Nevertheless, women with home-based businesses in Sweileh interviewed for the study said that they operated without any street signs or advertisements. The invisibility of their enterprises helps them avoid receiving fines, but restricts their ability to promote and expand their businesses beyond their immediate circles.

Looking forward

Most refugees want to live in urban areas, and tend to do better there than in camps. It's time to apply an urban lens to refugee response, and focus support towards inclusive urban services and safe, dignified livelihoods in the city, whether formal or informal.



Taken together, the four myths discussed here paint a picture of an international community that has turned its back on urban refugees, yet wants to see camps as stand-alone city-equivalents. This illogical stance needs to change.

The PDUW research has shown that, while some urban displaced people appear to be on track to achieve levels of wellbeing that are comparable to their urban hosts, others are struggling. The default advice to them is to 'return to the camp'. But maintaining camps comes at a huge financial cost, with demonstrably poor outcomes for health and overall wellbeing, and intergenerational immobility for those with the fewest social and economic resources. As the international community seeks to reduce aid dependency and foster self-reliance, creating new cities in the desert cannot be the answer.

It is time to switch to a pragmatic *in situ* urban response that engages with the reality of life for refugees and IDPs – particularly their involvement in the informal sector. Humanitarian and development programming needs to support local and national governments and provide incentives for authorities to remove the most significant barriers that stop displaced people achieving a decent life in the city.

There is scope for paying far greater attention to refugees and IDPs who are already trying to make a life for themselves and their families in towns and cities. This would require a radically different approach from humanitarian agencies, which would need to work in a way that incentivises city and national governments to open up labour markets and accommodate informal enterprise. It would also need to support local authorities and other agencies to help refugees access the health, education and other services that are available to long-term city residents. Targeted assistance at the individual and household level would likely also be required, but could be designed in a way that increases the likelihood that recipients can – over time – live without assistance, or at least be less reliant upon it.

There is also emerging interest in connecting camps with urban planning. If they must be constructed, then they should be located close to existing urban centres^{63,39}. Camps could be sited in areas that are already designated as city expansion zones, so that they can be consolidated as future suburbs for long-term residents. Camps could also be constructed as 'urban infill', in underdeveloped areas within existing city boundaries³⁹. Constructing camps with the future city in mind would facilitate refugee integration into local labour markets, and could be designed in a way to facilitate basic services for both hosts and refugees.

This issue paper demonstrates a need to work with the realities of urban refugees' livelihoods, and recognise the potential for informal sector enterprise – including very small-scale street vending – to provide livelihood opportunities. Recent high-profile programmes to create formal work have not evolved as anticipated, and formalisation does not necessarily remove the risk of abuse. So, a dual approach should be considered. Efforts to promote business formalisation and job creation should continue where feasible. But there is also a need to reduce exploitation and harassment in the informal economy more widely, and foster a more protective environment for self-employed refugees and for local host populations.

The PDUW research in Nairobi found small-scale mutual support mechanisms among women street hawkers that could provide a model for further support. Lessons from the development sector could prove valuable here, for example on informal social protection, informal workers' unions, savings groups and other communal support mechanisms (e.g. childcare for women who want to work). In Nairobi, previous efforts to raise awareness among the police and reduce harassment and extortion have had some success^{64,65}. They could be repeated and trialled elsewhere.

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This paper challenges decision makers' and humanitarian practitioners' reliance on stereotypes about protracted displacement. It questions received ideas about camps and about displaced people's experiences in towns and cities. It is structured around four such 'myths', examining each in turn, before discussing the lived realities refugees face, especially when seeking informal work in urban areas. These four myths maintain the status quo in funding and programming priorities that privilege camps, and that prevent hundreds of thousands of displaced people from finding more dignified, productive and meaningful lives in urban areas. It is time to switch to *in situ* support within urban areas, and to improve conditions for both IDPs/refugees and local populations working in the informal sector.

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